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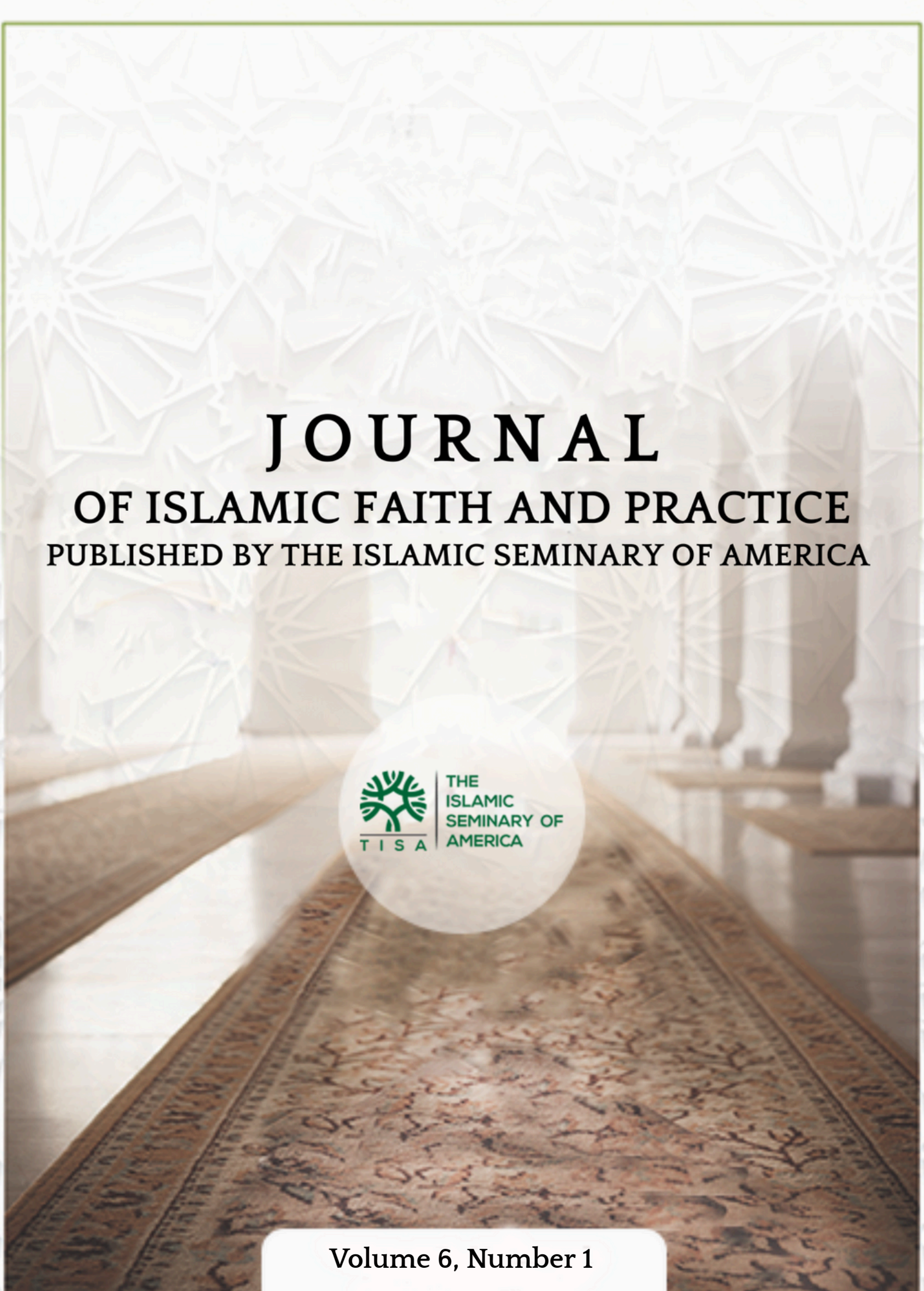


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Volume 6, Number 1

# *Advancing Islamic Chaplaincy in North America*

December 2025

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# Editorial

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

I am pleased to present the sixth volume of the *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice*, entitled "**Advancing Islamic Chaplaincy in North America**." Muslim chaplaincy in North America is a growing, vital field, bridging faith and public service in diverse settings like the military, hospitals, prisons, and campuses. Muslim chaplains offer crucial spiritual support, yet face unique challenges such as cultural misunderstandings, lack of established training pathways, and combating stereotypes—all while forging a distinctly North American Islamic pastoral care model that embraces interfaith work and empowers diverse leadership. While the School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS) was a significant early effort for formalized Muslim chaplain training in the US, Hartford Seminary (now Hartford International University for Religion and Peace) launched the first accredited Islamic Chaplaincy program in 2001, filling a crucial need for military and broader chaplaincy requirements, and making it a key pioneer in the field.

Muslim chaplaincy faces significant statistical shortfalls in major US sectors in their efforts to meet the spiritual needs of a diverse Muslim population, though recent decades have seen growth, especially on college campuses. A Pew survey mentioned in an Oxford article (2023) noted a severe lack of Muslim chaplains in state prisons, with only 7% of chaplain respondents being Muslim in a 50-state survey, reflecting a long-standing issue (Stark 2023). Reports from late 2020 and 2021 (ISPU) on Muslim chaplaincy reveal a high demand for culturally sensitive spiritual care, especially in healthcare and corrections, but highlight significant gaps in availability, with many Muslim patients lacking access to chaplains during critical times such as end-of-life care, despite the highly perceived importance of prayer, spiritual and religious education, and emotional support. Key findings show Muslim chaplains are highly educated but often under-certified and face challenges balancing traditional Islamic care with institutional demands, while also serving diverse populations with unique needs, often alongside roles as imams (Abu-Ras 2010).

Despite the essential role which Muslim chaplains already play in many institutions, much of the American Muslim community is completely unaware of this evolving field. As Sajida Jalalzai astutely notes:

> What is a Muslim chaplain? Much of the existing scholarship on Islamic chaplaincy engages with this deceptively simple question, providing essential foundational information about the roles, responsibilities, and history of Muslim chaplains in North America. (Jalalzai 2024)

In focusing on "**Advancing Islamic Chaplaincy in North America**," this volume bridges a critical gap in existing scholarship by integrating essential scholarly information with the practical experiences and lived knowledge of practicing chaplains. The sixth volume of the *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* includes four articles and nine reflections:

My article, "The Guiding Light: Qurʾānic Wisdom and Prophetic Examples in Chaplaincy," establishes wisdom (*ḥikma*) as foundational to the practice of Islamic chaplaincy and to care, mentorship, and teaching overall. It outlines a model for wisdom based on the Qurʾān and its Prophetic application, using the hermeneutical method of *al-waḥda al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān* (the Qurʾān's structural unity), as well as combining the "Two Readings" (the revelation and the universe) and the Qurʾān's higher objectives (*al-maqāṣid al-Qur'āniyya*) to better understand what the Qurʾān says about wisdom and how to embody it. Through this method, several terms related to *ḥikma*, such as *taqwā*, *ʿilm*, *rushd*, *qawlan sadīdan*, and *iṣlāḥ*, are explored, allowing for a fuller elucidation of the Islamic understanding of wisdom. After presenting some examples the Qurʾān gives of role models who embodied this characteristic, the article then explores its opposite: including the Qurʾānic terms associated with lacking wisdom (*jahala*, *lā yaʿqilūn*, *safaha*, and *ghafla*), as well as the characteristics and consequences of being unwise. This study concludes with how chaplains (and anyone else entrusted with the care, mentoring, or teaching of others) can develop and embody wisdom, especially within significant life decisions.

In "The Illuminating Lamp: A Four-Step Model for Islamic Chaplaincy in North America," authors Sondos Kholaki, Shapla Shaheen, and Shane Atkinson argue that while many contemporary psychosocial tools employed within chaplaincy are useful, they must be re-anchored in *tawḥīd* and a Qurʾānic anthropology. Muslim chaplains serve not as neutral spiritual caregivers, but as *khalīfa*s (trustees) whose practice is tied to revelation, divine purpose, and self-purification. To this end, they present a four-step chaplaincy model derived from Qurʾān 33:45–46: "O Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, a bearer of good news, a warner, and as one who invites to God, by His permission, as a beacon of light." Witnessing, bearing good news, warning or directing, and inviting to God are proposed as sequential steps for chaplaincy encounters, each building upon proper spiritual presence, trust, and wisdom.

Ingrid Mattson's "Identity, Accountability, and Power in the American Muslim Community and in Islamic Chaplaincy" argues that chaplaincy is not merely spiritual caregiving but also a formative space where Muslim identity is defined in North America. Questions of who is authorized to represent Islam and how remain central, with Muslim chaplains bringing varying theological, cultural, and juridical backgrounds. Mattson argues that chaplaincy is part of Islam's "discursive tradition," shaped by who is included in the conversation. The author stresses that effective Muslim chaplaincy must include the community as well as confront systemic injustices, especially anti-Black racism, and understand the cultural realities of diverse Muslim communities.

Through her article, Mattson demonstrates that Islamic identity in chaplaincy is diverse and contested, and that institutions must acknowledge and negotiate this diversity. Muslim endorsing bodies must wield their power ethically, avoiding reductive legalism and acknowledging the broader moral responsibilities of leadership. Power must be supervised, accountable, and oriented toward justice. Endorsers should avoid restricting "Islamic" concerns to *fiqh* alone, recognizing the moral stakes of issues like racism, misogyny, and institutional harm.

In "Change from Within: A Model for Training Imams and Muslim Chaplains about Domestic Violence," authors Salma E. Abugideiri, Fatima Y. Mirza, Tahani Chaudhry, Hasnaa Mokhtar, and Denise Ziya Berte explain that faith leaders (such as imams and chaplains) are often first responders in cases of domestic violence (DV) and that their responses can either help or harm. Unfortunately, many imams and Muslim chaplains lack training, resulting in the misuse of religious texts, minimization of abuse, and re-victimization of survivors. In this article, the authors present findings from two cohorts of the Peaceful Families Project's (PFP) domestic violence first responder training for imams and chaplains; a training which blends mental health expertise, Islamic scholarship, and cultural grounding.

Through the administration of pre-, post-, and follow-up surveys, the researchers found that training significantly increased leaders' knowledge, confidence, and preparedness to respond to domestic violence. Prior to the training, many participants reported minimal or no previous exposure to DV training or counseling skills, despite being frequently approached with complex family violence cases. Training helped correct misconceptions and barriers, and encouraged safer, survivor-centered responses. After the two-day PFP training, imams and chaplains showed large gains in understanding domestic violence dynamics, knowing how to respond safely, and feeling prepared to act, although some challenges remained.

In her reflection entitled "Does Islam Have Its Own Tradition of Spiritual Care? The Twelve Principles of Spiritual Care in the Muhammadan Model," Feryal Salem shows how Islam has a rich, Prophetic tradition of spiritual care rooted in the character, teachings, and companionship (*ṣuḥba*) of the Prophet Muhammad. She outlines twelve principles for spiritual care which can be derived from the practice of the Prophet, including "do no harm," meeting people where they are, connecting before correcting, making religion easy, flexibility and diplomacy, gradual teaching, cultural relevance, political intelligence, compassion, avoiding personal gain, humility, and confidentiality. These principles emphasize prioritizing mercy over rigidity, recognizing individual capacity, safeguarding dignity, and ensuring that guidance draws people toward God rather than alienating them. Salem demonstrates that the goal of Islamic spiritual care is stewardship, not control, and she provides a framework relevant not only to Muslim chaplains but to caregivers across traditions.

Raymond Elias reflects on how Islamic chaplaincy has changed and stayed the same over the past nine years in his "Reflections on a Master of Divinity (MDiv) Thesis: 'Professional Muslim Chaplaincy: Defining a Role for Religious Authority and Leadership in the US Context'." He explains that Muslim chaplaincy sits between traditional Islamic scholarship and professional pastoral care, where Muslim chaplains often have strong Clinical Pastoral Education training but may lack the deep classical Islamic studies of imams and *ʿulamāʾ*. This creates a gap in religious authority, raises questions about standards of preparation, and requires careful navigation by both institutions and Muslim communities. Elias illustrates how Islamic chaplaincy programs have responded to these gaps, mentioning for example the fact that Hartford Seminary and Bayan Islamic Graduate School have added Arabic requirements to their curricula; however, limitations still exist. To address these limitations, he proposes a dual-solution pathway; one in which

organizations such as the Muslim Endorsement Council, ISNA, and the Association of Muslim Chaplains provide short-term support via creating and enforcing standards and continuing education, and in which Islamic seminaries and chaplaincy programs collaborate in the long-term to provide the curricula and training needed, combining both classical seminary education and rigorous pastoral formation.

Kamal Abu-Shamsieh's "Spiritual Formation: A CPE Chaplaincy Training Model Based on an Islamic Paradigm" shows how Muslim chaplains benefit from Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) models that reflect Islamic beliefs. With traditional CPE programs being rooted primarily in Christian theology, Muslim chaplains are left to figure out on their own how to ground their own practice of chaplaincy on Qurʾānic themes, Prophetic narratives, and Islamic theological principles. Through presenting a case study of a CPE program based on an Islamic paradigm (focusing on concepts such as *tawḥīd*, *taqwā*, *iḥsān*, and *ṣuḥba*), Abu-Shamsieh shows how aligning pastoral practice with Islamic sources can strengthen students' theological competency and enable them to construct care theories consistent with Islamic beliefs, offering a holistic framework for responding to illness, suffering, death, and ethical decision-making rooted in Islamic theology, law, and pastoral tradition. Such a program demonstrated that with a tailored curriculum, Muslim chaplains were able to enhance their cultural competency and patient support, even when taught by non-Muslim educators, highlighting the need for a formal Islamically grounded CPE model globally.

In "Envisioning Survivor-Centered Anti-Violence Spiritual Care," Safia Mahjebin makes a moving and powerful case for the need for anti-violence chaplaincy, based on her own deeply personal experience as a gender-based violence (GBV) survivor-advocate and chaplaincy student. Through her story, she demonstrates the challenges which faith-oriented domestic violence and spiritual violence survivors/victims face in their families, communities, and when seeking help from religious leaders, DV services, and other individuals and systems that are theoretically supposed to support them. As a survivor, even while being empowered by her faith to escape a dangerous home, Mahjebin was made to feel isolated from her faith community. As an advocate for other survivors/victims, she faced racism, Islamophobia, and exploitation in the very movements and organizations which ostensibly were there to advocate for her. Through her reflections, Mahjebin demonstrates how Clinical Pastoral Education with the right educator can help survivors/victims process their own experiences and make space to care for others. She proposes the role which chaplaincy can play in supporting survivors/victims—stating that "if we acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual abuse, then we ought to acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual healing and wellness, and that requires faith-affirming spiritual services"—while acknowledging the shortcomings of chaplaincy as it is currently practiced. All in all, Mahjebin's argument for an Islamic chaplaincy education which prepares chaplains to be true advocates and a CPE specialization in GBV/DV that is shaped by survivors/victims themselves, is a stirring call for chaplains, educators, program designers, and community members.

"Beyond Pastoral Care: Justice-Oriented Islamic Chaplaincy" by Ibrahim J. Long highlights the need for Muslim chaplains to be trained to not only provide pastoral care, but to also be advocates in the pursuit of justice. Muslims and Muslim chaplains face

increasing hostility and systemic challenges, frequently confronted by racism, Islamophobia, institutional pressures, and even harassment—a reality that has become more starkly evident over the last two years when trying to advocate for the Palestinian cause and those supporting it. Long argues that current chaplaincy training is insufficient for today's realities; the Christian pastoral and interfaith models taught do not equip chaplains to navigate systemic discrimination, contentious political issues, or institutional power dynamics. On the other hand, Islamic chaplaincy has roots in social justice advocacy: the early Black American Muslim pioneering chaplains had their start in prisons, where their advocacy led to reforms which Muslims and non-Muslims both benefit from today. Long emphasizes the need for connecting Islamic chaplaincy education back to its longstanding tradition of legal advocacy, resistance to oppression, and pursuit of religious rights. In addition to making this history play a more prominent role, Islamic chaplaincy curricula should integrate social work and justice-oriented training, leading to programs that include anti-oppressive practice, decolonial frameworks, policy navigation, and community development to prepare chaplains for contemporary challenges.

Sondos Kholaki reflects on her experience as a Muslim hijab-wearing police chaplain in "Muslim Chaplains in Law Enforcement: Challenges and Opportunities." While hoping that her presence would build bridges and better understanding both within law enforcement and the community, the author faced challenges in a predominantly White, male, Christian law enforcement culture, including microaggressions, isolation, and cultures resistant to change. In attending a three-day police chaplaincy training, she realized that the practice of chaplaincy in law enforcement was heavily shaped by evangelical Christian norms, with chaplains openly framing their role as an opportunity to spread Christianity. Kholaki did experience meaningful encounters particularly within her ride-alongs with officers, illustrating the possibility for empathy, shared identity, and humanization. However, after standing with fearful students at a university pro-Palestine encampment while wearing her chaplain badge, Kholaki faced criticism from the police department, and this misalignment between her values and the institution's culture, combined with moral distress and advocacy fatigue, led her to resign from her position as a police chaplain. Kholaki concludes that to provide authentic chaplaincy, one must feel they can operate with integrity, in accordance with their values, and that they must feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

In "A Muslim Chaplain's Role in Government Institutions: Navigating Around Religious Freedom," Mustafa Boz explains the responsibilities and requirements of serving as a staff chaplain within the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Chaplains must act in accordance with the First Amendment and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), supporting the religious needs of all recognized faith groups and ensuring fairness, consistency, and non-preferential treatment, even if practices may conflict with their own personal beliefs. For staff chaplains who are Muslim, they also serve as cultural and religious consultants when Muslim inmates request religious accommodations, especially those which may diverge from mainstream Islamic interpretations. Through the use of case studies, Boz demonstrates that upholding "stricter" Islamic opinions, as long as they are sincerely held by the inmates and even while the chaplain personally may hold a less

stringent juristic opinion, can protect religious freedoms and actually lead to greater accommodations and offerings which benefit many more inmates.

Yusuf Hasan and Mira Abou Elezz argue for the importance of Muslim chaplains becoming board certified in "Board Certification: Its Requirements, Process, and Value - The Personal Experience of a Muslim Chaplain." Board certification ensures that chaplains meet professional standards in spiritual assessment, ethics, interfaith care, and self-awareness. The authors outline the process for obtaining this certification, which includes completing graduate education, CPE, extensive clinical hours, essays, and an interview, and they explain that this acts as a safeguard against harm and promotes high-quality, ethical care. Three case studies are presented, in which the application of competencies tested for within the board certification process directly improved patient well-being within a hospital setting. These examples show the transformative role of trained chaplains in safeguarding dignity and providing holistic care.

Mona Islam's "The Development of Islamic Chaplaincy in the United States: An Interview with Dr. Jimmy Jones" gives a brief overview of how the field of Islamic chaplaincy in the United States came to be. In it, Dr. Jones, executive vice president of The Islamic Seminary of America and one of the pioneers of Islamic chaplaincy education, explains how Islamic chaplaincy in the US emerged informally in the 1970s, with the Nation of Islam taking the lead in prison chaplaincy. He stresses that while Christian seminaries like Hartford played an early role in training Muslim chaplains, Muslims must develop and lead their own seminaries to ensure culturally and theologically grounded leadership training. It was a recognition of this need that led to the establishment of The Islamic Seminary of America, a graduate-level seminary created to train Muslim leaders using Islamic principles and culturally relevant curricula, with the aims of professionalizing chaplaincy, setting standards, and developing leadership rooted in the American Muslim experience. Islam and Jones reflect on the hesitance which the Muslim community sometimes shows in supporting such initiatives despite the need, and point out that by raising awareness on the immense positive impact which Islamic chaplaincy has had and can have on the community, we may see an increase in institutional support.

This volume also includes six book reviews: *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction* by Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo (reviewed by Ibrahim J. Long), *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* by Nazila Isgandarova (reviewed by Mona Islam), *With the Heart in Mind* and *When Hearing Becomes Listening* by Mikaeel Ahmed Smith (both reviewed in one piece by Raymond Elias), *An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching* by Sohaib Sultan and revised by Martin Nguyen (reviewed by Abdul-Muhaymin Priester, III), *Divine Pronouns: Unlocking the Definitive Quran: Part 1: Principles* by Omar Imady (reviewed by Nosheen Khan), and *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart* by Karen A. McClintock (reviewed by Saira Qureshi).

In addition to these, included are a touching tribute to Sohaib Sultan (may Allah have mercy upon him) written by Omer Bajwa, a report on the Association of Muslim Chaplain's 2025 annual conference by Jaye Starr, a research brief by MA in Public and Pastoral Leadership graduate Gulsen Cok, and two resources by the Muslim Endorsement Council.

We are grateful to everyone who helped bring this volume to fruition—including our contributors, peer reviewers, and editorial team—and we thank you for your patience. We would like to thank Chaplain Shazeeda Khan, president of the Muslim Endorsement Council, who played a key role in making this volume a reality. We would like to acknowledge the hard work put in by our TISA Fellow, Zeinab Ahmed, to ensure that every step of the process went as smoothly as possible, and by our incoming TISA Fellow, Huzaifah Islam-Khan, who aided Zeinab in the final steps.

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# The Guiding Light: Qurʾānic Wisdom and Prophetic Examples in Chaplaincy

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## Abstract

*During much of human history, wisdom has been a topic of interest in religion, philosophy, and, lately, psychology and the social sciences. Over the past three decades, this term's very definition has been debated among scholars who study human behavior. Psychologists actively explore it and increasingly focus on practical wisdom, recognizing it is a complex trait that contains cognitive, reflective, and compassionate components. They are finding that people who possess practical wisdom have better mental states and lead more purposeful lives. However, there is a growing concern about its potential decline, particularly in the context of navigating increasingly complex global challenges which require collective and collaborative wise responses. This perception is linked to various factors, among them the rapid pace of technological change, the rise of individualism, and shifts in human values (Maxwell 2007).*

*A lack of wisdom implies an inability to discern the best course of action, understand the consequences of choices, and apply knowledge effectively. Cultivating collective wisdom requires a shift in how knowledge is acquired, understood, and applied so that one can move beyond isolated facts to formulate an integrated and holistic understanding that considers spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and societal implications. Cultivating wisdom is essential for everyone, especially for those responsible for serving and guiding others and fostering spiritual growth, moral integrity, and a thriving society. Indeed, it is an important quality for Muslims in any leadership role, especially for those who serve as chaplains.*

*This article explores the concept of ḥikma (wisdom) within the Qurʾān and its prophetic application for Muslim chaplains providing holistic spiritual care. The article argues that by re-centering chaplaincy on this Qurʾānic-Prophetic model of wisdom, chaplains can offer spiritual care and enhance pastoral counseling that is both authentically Islamic and profoundly relevant to the complex psycho-spiritual needs of Muslims today. It concludes by briefly discussing the implications for chaplaincy training and practice, suggesting that integrating this wisdom-centric approach can foster greater spiritual resilience in individuals and communities, as well as strengthen the overall development of the Muslim chaplaincy profession and beyond.*

***Keywords:*** *chaplain, chaplaincy, wisdom, counseling, knowledge, spiritual growth, self-accountability*

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

## Introduction

A Muslim chaplain's primary job is to provide guidance and support, and to foster a sense of belonging and understanding in individuals (regardless of their religion or lack thereof), institutions (e.g., hospitals, universities, prisons, and the military), and communities. A Muslim chaplain provides spiritual and pastoral care in the form of religious guidance, conducting prayers, providing counseling, and offering support during times of crisis. Wisdom enables them to approach these sensitive situations with patience and insight, based on Islam's core principles.

Muslims believe that Allah, the All-Wise, created and entrusted humanity to serve as his *khalīfa* (stewards or trustees) on earth (Qurʾān 2:30). A key aspect of this trust is free will and the ability to choose. This entails being tested and held accountable in this world and on the Day of Judgment. Allah—the Creator, the Wise—knows humans' inherent nature and guides them accordingly, so they can achieve their mission to establish *iṣlāḥ* (improvement) and *iḥsān* (goodness or excellence) for the benefit of all creation. They do so by promoting ethical virtues, enacting justice, and striving for harmony. In short, Allah entrusted humanity with cultivating and maintaining *ʿumrān* (Qurʾān 11:61), defined as Earth's balance, peace, tranquility, fairness, justice, and sustainability.

Given this reality, cultivating wisdom is crucial because people's personal and communal decisions lead to actions that either improve or corrupt societies (Qurʾān 7:56). Wisdom, a common trait of all prophets (peace be upon them all), constitutes one of Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) missions: "Since We have sent you a messenger from among yourselves—reciting to you Our revelations, causing you to grow in purity, teaching you the Book and wisdom, and teaching you what you never knew" (2:151) and "We have sent you [O Prophet] only as a mercy for the whole world" (21:107). These Qurʾānic verses, and others, show us a deep connection between wisdom and compassion within his message, and that this is a connection we should implement in our own lives: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example for whoever has hope in Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah often" (33:21). His life and teachings exemplified mercy, for Allah told him to "Call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided" (16:125). All Muslims are expected to follow his example.

How can chaplains draw inspiration from the Prophet's (peace be upon him) life and apply it to our current reality? How do chaplains cultivate wisdom? How do chaplains embody compassion, justice, mercy, and patient practices?

Wisdom touches knowledge, emotions, self-regulation, and ethics. We use it to make informed decisions, build strong relationships, and live a more meaningful life. Al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111) defines wisdom primarily through the lens of knowledge and its application, emphasizing its role in attaining spiritual understanding and closeness to Allah

(Al-Ghazālī 1982).[1] Ibn al-Qayyim (1292–1350) defines this term as "doing the correct thing in the correct manner at the correct time" (Ibn al-Qayyim 1996).[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as the "capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgement in the choice of means and ends" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1926). Given these definitions, wisdom can be seen as a reflection of one's wise decision, of putting everything in its proper place at the proper time. While knowledge is the acquisition of facts, information, and understanding, wisdom is the ability to apply that knowledge and experience in practical ways in order to make sound judgments and navigate life's complexities.

This article analyzes wisdom from the Qurʾānic-Prophetic framework and uses the compare-contrast method to reveal the impact of its presence or absence on one's actions, behaviors, and relationships in this world and the hereafter. This analysis demonstrates how a thorough open-hearted and open-minded reading can lead to a deeper connection with the Qurʾān's wisdom, as well as a better understanding of its transformative teachings as they relate to Muslim chaplaincy. Wisdom often comes with self-awareness and a continuous pursuit of self-improvement, which can lead to a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

The following questions are explored: What does the Qurʾān say about wisdom and how to embody it? What are the characteristics of wise and unwise people? How does wisdom relate to chaplaincy? How do we evaluate our decisions based on the Qurʾānic-Prophetic model? And perhaps most importantly: **What is the Qurʾānic guidance for correcting a wrong action, custom, or culture?**

This article applies three methodologies: (1) *al-waḥda al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān* (the Qurʾān's structural unity); (2) combining the "Two Readings" (the revelation and the universe); and (3) the Qurʾān's higher objectives (*al-maqāṣid al-Qur'āniyya*: *tawḥīd*, *tazkiyya*, and *ʿumrān*).

The holistic exegetical (*tafsīr*) method of *al-waḥda al-binā'iyya li-l-Qur'ān* reads the Qurʾān as a unified and integrated text through its linguistic, structural, and conceptual elements. This approach also highlights how the meaning of a specific term changes throughout the text of the Qurʾān, but never to the extent of violating its original meaning; but instead, adding depth to our understanding of the word. Tracing how the relevant terms are derived from their root leads to constructing the Islamic framework for any issue.[3]

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[1] This definition is found in his influential work, "The Book of Knowledge" (*Kitāb al-ʿIlm*), which is the first book of his magnum opus, "Revival of the Religious Sciences" (*Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*). In "The Book of Knowledge," Al-Ghazālī explores the nature of knowledge and its relationship to faith, theology, and jurisprudence. He delves into the virtues of knowledge, both from rational and traditional perspectives, and discusses the different types of knowledge and the obligation to seek it. He also distinguishes between praiseworthy and blameworthy forms of knowledge and warns against the perils of excessive debate and disputation.

[2] Ibn al-Qayyim's definition of wisdom in his work *Madārij al-Sālikīn* (The Steps of the Seekers) is "to do what is appropriate, in the manner that is appropriate, and at the appropriate time" (pp. 448–449). He places this station of wisdom among the higher spiritual states that a believer can attain on their journey to Allah.

[3] See the following articles for more information on this exegetical methodology: Zainab Alwani, "*Al-waḥda al-bināʾiyya li-l-Qurʾān*: A Methodology for Understanding the Qurʾān in the Modern Day," *Journal of*

Combining the "Two Readings"—that of the divine revelation (i.e., the Qurʾān) and the universe—is critical to exploring wisdom, for this method underscores the Qurʾān's call to reflect on both the signs within its verses and those in the natural and social worlds and within ourselves (Qurʾān 51:20–23). This technique encourages holistic engagement by drawing parallels between divine revelation and the physical world, while understanding the sociocultural dynamics of past and present societies. The Qurʾān encourages reflection on past communities and their actions' consequences, as a source of learning to seek answers for our current societal issues. Its profound framework for human existence is encapsulated in its higher objectives: *tawḥīd* (believing in and affirming Allah's Oneness), *tazkiyya* (holistic purification; purifying oneself should lead to purifying one's surroundings), and *ʿumrān* (developing a values-based civilization to achieve good and harmony among the human family).

These principles define humanity's role as trustees of Allah's creation, shaping how we engage with our faith, the environment, and other people. This mission requires possessing both knowledge and wisdom. Viewing wisdom as compassion toward all creation while holding firm to the truth, the Qurʾān defines it as inspiring acts of kindness, charity, and empathy. Such an orientation is critical to effective chaplaincy. In addition, it advocates a balanced approach toward fulfilling worldly responsibilities while maintaining a strong connection with the Divine. This article concludes with a set of questions that may help chaplains identify the significant decisions in their lives and evaluate their impact at the personal, familial, communal, societal, and global levels.

## PART ONE: A QURʾĀNIC-PROPHETIC FRAMEWORK FOR WISDOM

### I. Definition

The Qurʾānic concept of wisdom (*ḥikma*), derived from the Arabic root *ḥ-k-m*, is profound and comprehensive. Ibn Manẓūr writes in his *Lisān al-ʿArab* (The Tongue of the Arabs) that *ḥakama*, derived from *ḥ-k-m*, refers to an iron rein piece used in a horse's bridle to restrain and prevent it from going wild. This connection highlights the root's inherent concept of control, restraint, and judicious guidance. The root broadly carries meanings of judging, being wise, passing a verdict, and preventing or restraining people from wrongdoing (Ibn Manẓūr 1955).[4] In short, wisdom can restrain or control negative

*Islamic Faith and Practice* 1, no. 1 (2018): 7–25; Zainab Alwani, "Transformational Teaching: Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a Teacher and Murabbī," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2019): 91–119; Zainab Alwani, "*Kafāla*: The Qur'anic-Prophetic Model of Orphan Care," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 3, no. 1 (2020): 4–31; Zainab Alwani, "Transforming the Self, Family and Society through a Qur'anic Ethos," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2022): 10–33; Zainab Alwani, "Travelers on the Straight Path: Truth Seekers," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2024): 7–30.

[4] Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manẓūr (1233–1311) was an Arab lexicographer, who completed *Lisān al-ʿArab* in 1290. It is the best-known dictionary of the Arabic language, as well as one of the most comprehensive. This detail highlights the importance of the Ibn Manẓūr dictionary as a valuable source not only for the comprehensive understanding of Arabic words but also for its cultural and historical information, including insights into equestrian practices of the time.

impulses, for it is a force that allows one to master situations and avoid corruption or deviation from the desired outcomes.

*Ḥikma* and its derivatives are mentioned in the Qurʾān in 242 places, eighty-two places as a verb (e.g., "So Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection" [2:113]) and 160 places as a noun. The verbal noun *iḥkām* implies perfection and completion: "Alif, Lām, Rā. [This is] a Book whose verses are well perfected and then fully explained. [It is] from the One [Who is] All-Wise, All-Aware" (11:1). In his *tafsīr* (commentary on the Qurʾān), Abdul-Rahman al-Sa'di (1889–1957) describes the Qurʾān as a perfect and detailed book:

> This is a great Book and a noble revelation. Its verses are perfected, its messages are truthful, its commands and prohibitions are just, its words are eloquent, and its meanings are beautiful. Then it is explained in detail, from the One Who puts things in their proper places and assigns them their proper positions. He does not command or forbid except in accordance with His wisdom. He is All-Aware of all things, both outward and inward. (Al-Sa'di 2022)[5]

The Qurʾān emphasizes wisdom in a broader way as well, as a profound gift from Allah available to those who diligently strive for it: "He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good" (2:269). This gift enables discernment between right and wrong as well as truth and falsehood and, ultimately, allows one to make choices that lead to success in this world and the hereafter. Believers are encouraged to strive for it through sincere intention, righteous action, and connecting with the Qurʾān. Abū Hurayra reported: "The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, 'The word of wisdom (*al-kalima al-ḥikma*) is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, he is most deserving of it'" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2687).

Contemplating the root word and its derivatives provides a deeper understanding of this concept and how to apply it in one's life. The Qurʾān often associates *ḥikma* with sound judgment, deep understanding, appropriate action at the right time, and alignment with the divine will. Being honest with oneself and others, along with a high degree of self-awareness, is crucial for developing wisdom, for this concept is all about understanding the consequences of actions and applying that understanding to real-world situations. Wisdom often involves emotional intelligence (a chaplaincy necessity), empathy, and the ability to see the bigger picture. Being wise means that one is responsible for pursuing righteous purposes. For example, *taḥkīm*, which refers to both arbitration and reconciliation (*iṣlāḥ*) in marital conflicts, can be understood as a manifestation of *ḥikma*, as it involves setting things right or reforming—hence its derivation from the same root word. Verse 4:35 of the Qurʾān emphasizes the appointment of arbiters (*ḥakam*) from both families so that "if they both desire reconciliation, Allah will cause it between them." In this case, the arbiters would seek to understand the conflict's root causes, consider all relevant factors,

[5] Al-Sa'di is known for his straightforward and easy-to-understand explanations of the Qurʾān. His *tafsīr* is widely regarded for its clarity and accessibility, making it suitable for both those new to the Qurʾān and seasoned scholars.

and propose just and conducive solutions. Another example is *taḥkum* (judging or governing), as seen specifically in Qurʾān 4:58. This manifests *ḥikma* in terms of trusts (e.g., fulfilling responsibilities and upholding rights), a prerequisite for establishing a just and equitable society.

The most frequently repeated derivative of this root in the Qurʾān is *ḥakīm* (the wise), mentioned in eighty-one places. Al-Ḥakīm is one of the names of Allah: "The All-Wise" (4:17; 4:26; 6:18; 6:73). The Qurʾān itself is referred to as the "Book of Wisdom," implying that wisdom is an integral component of divine revelation and guidance. When paired together, the names Al-ʿAzīz Al-Ḥakīm refer to Allah: "The Almighty, the All-Wise." This combination appears forty-seven times in the Qurʾān, thereby emphasizing that Allah's immense power is always exercised with perfect wisdom and knowledge and that His actions are always purposeful and beneficial (Yaqeen Institute 2024). This illustrates that even when faced with hardship, believers should trust in Allah's wisdom and know that His plans, although sometimes difficult to understand, are ultimately for their benefit. Sūra Yūsuf (Chapter 12) provides a powerful illustration of these attributes via its repeated mentions of "Knowing and Wise," emphasizing through this that all the difficult events in Prophet Yūsuf's life ultimately led to good outcomes because of Allah's knowledge and wisdom.

The root of *ḥakīm* also carries the meaning of restraining or preventing something, highlighting that Allah's wisdom prevents injustice, guiding instead toward righteousness. Two other names and attributes of Allah stem from the same root: Al-Ḥakam and Aḥkam al-Ḥākimīn. Al-Ḥakam means "The Judge" and "The Giver of Justice," thereby signifying Allah's role as the Ultimate Judge, the One who establishes justice and truth, possessing the power to judge and arbitrate with perfect justice and wisdom, ensuring that nothing occurs without His decree and that His decree cannot be overturned.

The third attribute, Aḥkam al-Ḥākimīn, appears twice in the Qurʾān and combines two aspects: The Ultimate Judge who dispenses justice (11:45) and the Most Just of all judges (95:8). The first aspect of this attribute—that Allah is the Ultimate Judge—means that His judgments are always correct, and all His creations and commands are based on perfect wisdom. The Qurʾān assures and emphasizes that His reckoning on the Day of Judgment will be most fair and accurate. Every action, no matter how small, shall be taken into account and judged justly (as demonstrated in 2:281 and 16:111). Believing in Al-Ḥakam and Aḥkam al-Ḥākimīn encourages one to strive for justice in his/her personal affairs and interactions, as well as reminds people to trust in Allah's wisdom and judgment even when the underlying reasons are not fully understood.

## II. Connections Between the Qurʾānic Terms Related to Wisdom

It is important to emphasize the relational nature of Qurʾānic words, particularly wisdom (*ḥikma*) and the foundational related terms, such as *taqwā*, *al-ʿilm*, *al-rushd, al-qawl al-sadīd, and iṣlāḥ*. Examining how a word is used in different Qurʾānic contexts gives scholars an insight into the Qurʾān's conceptual understanding of the term and its broader meaning. For instance, *taqwā* is a fundamental concept associated with making sound decisions based on consciousness of Allah, fostering deep understanding, and leading to right actions. Thus, combined with *ḥikma*, it can be understood as being able to discern the

true nature of things, to put things in their proper context, and to act in accordance with righteous principles. *Ḥikma* provides the insight needed to use *ʿilm* ethically. *Al-qawl al-sadīd* (speaking justly), a practical expression of *ḥikma*, requires both knowledge and wisdom. *Al-rushd* can be seen as a facet or manifestation of wisdom, particularly in terms of being guided toward the correct path and having sound judgment in practical matters. The sections below will expand on each of these related terms.

### *Taqwā*

*Taqwā*, derived from *waqā* (lit. to preserve, protect, safeguard, shield from, and keep safe from [Al-Iṣfahānī 2014, 530; Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008, 1069]), means:

> "forbearance, fear, abstinence, and piety" (Esposito 2003, 314), as well as "being careful, knowing your place in the cosmos." This characteristic is seen when one experiences the awe of God, which "inspires a person to be on guard against wrong feeling and action, and eager to do the things which please God" (Zanaty 2006, 221). (Alwani 2022, 14; in-text citations added)

A state of the heart, it keeps one always conscious and mindful of Allah's presence. As *taqwā* inhabits the heart and only Allah knows what it conceals, no one can judge another person's level of *taqwā*.

This divine consciousness serves as a moral compass, guiding believers to navigate their feelings, decisions, actions, and interactions in alignment with Allah's guidance. Self-awareness and knowing is the first step toward personal development and spiritual growth. The relationship between *taqwā* and wisdom is critical, for the former helps people maintain self-evaluation: defined as the ability to examine oneself internally and delve deeply into their own thoughts, feelings, and actions to foster self-reflection and introspection. This critical self-evaluation enables people to filter and cleanse their inner self, based on their level of *taqwā*. Constantly evaluating one's thoughts, words, and deeds helps one identify those areas that require improvement, strive to overcome shortcomings, and ensure continuous spiritual growth through holding oneself accountable. This self-accountability motivates individuals to pursue their own development and seek opportunities to enhance their actions and knowledge. This recognition also cultivates a sense of humility, encouraging believers to seek forgiveness and remain grateful for Allah's blessings.

Moreover, *taqwā* serves as a unifying force within the community, as those striving for it encourage better behavior, offer support, and remind others to stay on the right path. In short, it transcends cultural, social, and economic differences, binding believers together through a shared commitment to uphold Allah's commands. This collective consciousness nurtures a sense of solidarity, mutual respect, and compassion among believers, thereby fostering an environment of support and cooperation. Those engaged in this transformative journey inspire and challenge others and actively seek feedback to identify areas for improvement. This process entails understanding one's strengths and weaknesses, setting clear and measurable ambitious goals, and striving for continuous improvement—all of which are pivotal for personal and collective growth and for embodying wisdom. It is obvious that such a practice enhances chaplaincy work.

*Al-Muttaqūn* (truth seekers cultivating *taqwā*) are constantly mindful of Allah's presence, practicing self-awareness and searching for the truth even if it is against oneself (Alwani 2022, 16). Identified as patient, true, and obedient in worshiping Allah, they spend (in the way of Allah) and seek forgiveness in the last hours of the night (3:17), control their anger, manage their negative feelings, practice forgiveness, and are grateful (2:177). Aware of the source of sin (i.e., Satan), they remember Allah, seek refuge in Him, and turn to Him quickly, after which they remain steadfast and correct their mistakes: "In Allah's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him (*atqākum*): Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware" (49:13).

### *ʿIlm*

Interconnected with *ḥikma*, the broad concept of *ʿilm* emphasizes the importance of understanding, righteousness, and responsible action. Allah's names Al-ʿAlīm ("The All-Knowing") and Al-Ḥakīm ("The All-Wise") appear together thirty-seven times within the Qurʾān. The word "*ʿilm*" (knowledge) is mentioned frequently, along with its various derived forms, and is considered a prerequisite for good deeds. In fact, seeking it is an act of worship, whereas *ḥikma* focuses on its proper application. Prioritizing knowledge that leads to wisdom and practical application is crucial for personal growth, societal development, and fulfilling one's purpose.

This article focuses on explaining the purpose of gaining the kind of knowledge that leads to cultivating *ḥikma*, in order to produce qualified trustees on Earth (2:30). Allah The All-Wise, the One who owns all knowledge and wisdom, details humanity's mission throughout the Qurʾān. Obtaining knowledge via understanding *al-maqāṣid al-Qur'āniyya* (the Qurʾān's higher objectives; namely: *tawḥīd*, *tazkiyya*, and *ʿumrān*) can provide a valuable roadmap for navigating human existence, discovering life's purpose, and being an effective chaplain.

In applying *ʿilm* with the goal of reaching *ḥikma*, one must ask oneself: How does a particular thought lead to a wise decision? How do I know it was a wise choice?

### *Rushd*

This term signifies right guidance or sound judgment. In the Qurʾān, Al-Rashīd ("The Guide" or "The Rightly Guided") denotes the One who guides and directs individuals to the right path and to belief. While *ḥikma* is the broad term for wisdom, *rushd* can be seen as one aspect of that wisdom. These two terms are closely linked, for they represent interconnected concepts for navigating life, making sound judgments, possessing right-mindedness, and being on the correct path, all of which imply having discernment (11:78). Examples from Sūra Hūd demonstrate that individuals can be characterized by *rushd* through adhering to divine guidance and promoting righteousness within their communities. In fact, the root *r-sh-d* has the following classical Arabic connotations: to be directed aright, caused to follow the right course, directed to take the right way, caused to hold a right belief, and to adopt the right path (Al-Fayrūzābādī 1993).

Within its Qurʾānic usage, this term also signifies sound judgment, guidance, or being on the right path: "There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance (*al-rushd*) has

become distinct from error (*al-ghayy*), so whoever rejects false deities and believes in Allah has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. Allah is All-Hearing and All-Knowing" (2:256). Notice here the connection between knowledge (in the mention of Allah's name Al-ʿAlīm, in the adjectival form *ʿalīmun*) and *rushd*: for *rushd* (guidance, sound judgment), just like *ḥikma* (wisdom in a broader sense), relies on sound knowledge (*ʿilm*).

Another verse proclaims: "[O Prophet], if My servants ask you about Me, I am near. I respond to those who call Me, so let them respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be guided (*yarshudūn*)" (2:186). Verse 18:10 of the Qurʾān states: "Our Lord, grant us mercy from Yourself and facilitate for us our affair with right guidance (*hayyiʾ lanā min amrinā rashadā*)" (see also 72:2, 10, 14; 18:24; and 21:51).

As for righteousness, Allah says about the unjust and arrogant: "And if they see the path of right conduct (*sabīl al-rushd*), they will not take it as a path; but if they see the path of error, they will take it as a path" (7:146). What is meant here by implying that the path of right conduct is the path of righteousness? The Qurʾān frequently describes the arrogant and the unjust as lacking righteousness and being deserving of punishment and further misguidance, due to their denial of the truth (e.g., "This is because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them," [7:146]). Therefore, those who wish to follow the path of righteousness will be wise to follow the first path (i.e., the path of right conduct), unlike those being condemned in this verse.

The connection between knowledge (*ʿilm*) and sound judgment (*rushd*, and more broadly *ḥikma*) is summed up in the verse, "Moses said to him, 'Shall I follow you so that you may teach me (*tuʿallimani*) from what you have been taught (*ʿullimta*) of sound judgment (*rushdā*)?'" (18:66). The connection between *rushd* and benefit is made apparent in, "Say, 'Indeed, I have no power to harm you or to bring you to sound judgment (*rashadā*; translated by some scholars as "benefit you")'" (72:21).

## Who is the Person Described As "Rashīd" in the Qurʾān?

*Rashīd*, a person who is rightly-guided and possesses wisdom as well as sound judgment, is mentioned three times in the Qurʾān. When Prophet Lūṭ's (Lot) people approached him with evil intentions, he asked them: "Is there not among you a single right-minded man (*rajulun rashīdun*)?" (11:78). This highlights that a *rashīd* can recognize wrong and instead act in a righteous and sensible way. Prophet Shuʿayb's people sarcastically questioned his message: "Indeed you are the forbearer, right-minded (*al-ḥalīm al-rashīd*)" (11:87), indicating the qualities they associated with him—namely, forbearance and right-mindedness—even though they rejected his guidance. Referring to Pharaoh's actions and his followers' obedience, the Qurʾān states: "And Pharaoh's command was not well guided (*wa mā amru firʿawna bi-rashīd*)" (11:97). These verses collectively illustrate that a *rashīd* person is guided to the right path and possesses the good understanding and wisdom necessary for making sound and just decisions. Verse 11:78 above underscores the lament over the lack of such individuals in a society that had embraced evil deeds.

*Murshid* and the Practical Application of *Rushd*: Guidance, Truth, and Faith

Sūrat al-Kahf mentions *rushd* four times (18:10, 17, 24, 66). The term *murshid* is derived from the same root of *r-sh-d* to describe a teacher. Verse 18:17 uses *walīyyan murshidā* for a guiding friend or a righteous mentor. Understanding and reflecting upon such a person can offer valuable insights for chaplains, as well as others. Parents embody this quality by nurturing their children's development and guiding them toward uprightness and sound decision-making. This role encourages chaplains, parents, and other mentors to provide clear instruction and lead by example, thereby fostering a supportive environment for learning and growth.

Sūrat al-Kahf—specifically 18:17 and the surrounding verses—offers valuable and highly relevant lessons on raising and nurturing children, youth, and new Muslims with the qualities of faith, patience, trusting in Allah, and seeking guidance; all while the teacher embodies these same qualities themselves. The teachers highlighted in these verses remained firm in their faith, despite persecution, thereby exemplifying the importance of standing by one's principles and values when guiding others. Role models can instill patience in those they guide, demonstrating how to navigate difficulties with reliance on Allah and belief in His ultimate wisdom. These stories also offer a broader lesson about the transient nature of worldly life. In the story of the cave, the youth sought refuge together, indicating the strength that can be found in community support and collaboration. This perspective can inform guidance, help others prioritize spiritual growth, and encourage them to not be overly attached to material possessions or fleeting desires.

The Qurʾān emphasizes that *rushd*, defined by mental and spiritual maturity, is equally as important as physical maturity when it comes to handling responsibilities: "Test orphans until they reach marriageable age; then, if you find they have sound judgment (*rushdan*), hand over their property to them" (4:6). Adults should implement this understanding of wisdom as a comprehensive educational and training system. The general framework that defines this concept of maturity, both linguistically and in the Qurʾān, are the boundaries established by guidance, truth, correctness, righteousness, benefit, knowledge, mental maturity, and sound conscience—all essential elements and fundamental components of one entrusted with the responsibilities given to them by Allah.

### *Sound, Upright Speech (Qawl Sadīd)*

The Arabic phrase "*tasdīd al-sahm*" means to throw the arrow straight enough to hit the bullseye (Ibn Manẓūr 1955). *Qawl sadīd* refers to speech that is clear, unambiguous, appropriate, straight, accurate, to the point, and devoid of ambiguity, exaggeration, or falsehood (Al-Qurṭubī 2019; Shafi 1995).[6] The Qurʾān uses it in the context of inheritance, emphasizing the importance of speaking justly when dealing with vulnerable individuals like orphans: "Let those who would fear for the future of their own helpless children, if

[6] In his *Tafsīr al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, Al-Qurṭubī interprets the meaning of *qawl sadīd* (a straight, sound, or just word) in the context of Sūrat Al-Nisāʾ (4:9). In *Ma'ariful Qur'an*, Mufti Muhammad Shafi interprets *sadīd* as a comprehensive term that encompasses ideal speech. It can mean speech that is truthful *(ṣadīq),* correct, and free from error, exaggeration, or falsehood. It is sincere and not for show and is spoken politely and not harshly.

they were to die, show the same concern [for orphans]. Let them be mindful of Allah and speak out for justice (*yaqūlū qawlan sadīdan*)" (4:9). This involves not only speaking to them justly and in the best way, but also being mindful of their welfare and treating them appropriately.

The Relationship Between *Qawl Sadīd* and *Ḥikma*

*Ḥikma* is crucial for speaking in this manner, for wisdom guides one to speak the truth in a pertinent and appropriate way. In the Qurʾānic worldview, wisdom is deeply intertwined with the purpose of human life, a divine gift that guides individuals to understand and fulfill their intended purpose. Reflecting on the concept of *qawl sadīd* is highly significant in understanding how good and truthful speech, guided by wisdom, can lead to positive actions and strengthen relationships: "O you who have believed, fear Allah and speak words of appropriate justice. He will [then] amend your deeds and forgive your sins" (33:70–71). This principle extends to broader interpersonal interactions, advocating for respectful and clear communication and refraining from negative speech (e.g., gossip, slander, and harmful assumptions), all of which the Qurʾān explicitly condemns (49:10–13). Investing in people requires wisdom, and this approach to communication is presented as a fundamental aspect of Islamic teachings. A good Muslim chaplain will be aware of this Qurʾānic approach and implement it on a daily basis.

### *Iṣlāḥ: The Outcome of Ḥikma*

*Iṣlāḥ* comes from the root word *ṣ-l-ḥ* (the same root from which *ṣāliḥ*, commonly translated as "righteous" or "pious" is derived) and occurs in forty verses, among them 49:10, 4:114, 4:128, and 11:88. It means "to do good, proper, right, flourishing, useful, restore oneself or to reconcile people with one another, to make peace" (Kamali 2013). Other meanings are "to make something good, put something where it belongs, settle differences, reconciliation, peace, and to renew whatever is needed" (Kamali 2013). In his *Lisān al-ʿArab* (1990, p. 517), Ibn Manẓūr defines it as the opposite of destruction: to prevent destruction or repair something that has been damaged. *Iṣlāḥ* (reform, improvement, or reconciliation) therefore refers to the effort needed to improve a situation, rectify errors, eliminate rivalry, and promote harmony. It also encompasses a wide range of actions and intentions, including self-improvement, seeking repentance, reconciling disputes, promoting justice, forbidding evil, and striving to prevent corruption and destruction. When guided by wisdom, *iṣlāḥ* encompasses both outward changes and inner transformations, all to foster a deeper connection to spiritual principles (2:220; 4:35 and 114; 7:170; 28:18–22). In the Qurʾān, Allah tells humanity, "And your Lord [O Prophet] would never destroy a society unjustly while its people were acting rightly" (11:117). This is a powerful call for collective action toward betterment: encouraging communities to reflect on their actions, identify areas of injustice or moral decline, and work toward positive change.

All of the prophets were sent to establish *iṣlāḥ* and maintain it in their communities. As Prophet Shuʿayb affirmed: "My people, can you not see? What if I am acting on clear evidence from my Lord? He Himself has given me good provision: I do not want to do

what I am forbidding you to do, I only want to put things right (*al-iṣlāḥ*) as far as I can. I cannot succeed without Allah's help: I trust in Him, and always turn to Him" (11:88) and "Give full measure and weight and do not undervalue people's goods; do not cause corruption in the land after it has been set in order (*iṣlāḥihā*): this is better for you, if you are believers" (7:85). He critically assessed existing situations and recognized and advised against areas of potential corruption.

*Iṣlāḥ* is considered the ideal outcome of wisdom, as the latter equips individuals with the necessary knowledge and understanding to identify areas needing improvement, determine the right course of action, and implement change based on sound principles. *Ḥikma* guides the process of *iṣlāḥ* by providing the foundation for discerning what needs to be reformed and how to approach it, and for implementing positive changes. True belief inspires and motivates individuals to pursue *iṣlāḥ* both within themselves and in their communities, as well as to rectify errors, strive for personal growth, and work to eliminate negative traits.

The Qurʾān showcases the wisdom of the prophets by detailing their words, experiences, and actions, thereby offering timeless guidance. All prophets embodied wisdom and served as exemplars of being Allah's trustees in building *iṣlāḥ*, preventing and removing any corruption and mischief. Again, this type of rectification inspired by *iṣlāḥ* is a valuable tool for the Muslim chaplain.

## III. The Prophetic Embodiment and Teaching of Wisdom

*Ḥikma* is mentioned together with "the Book" (i.e., *al-Kitāb wa-l-Ḥikma*) in nine places within the Qurʾān (2:129, 151, and 231; 3:48 and 164; 4:54 and 113; 5:110; 62:2), all of which emphasize that all of the prophets were sent with the same message and that they embodied wisdom. In Sūrat al-Anʿām, Allah mentioned eighteen prophets from Nūḥ (Noah) to ʿĪsā (Jesus), peace be upon them: "And from their fathers and their descendants and their brothers—and We chose them and guided them to a straight path" (6:87). The accounts of all prophets highlight the unwavering faith, perseverance, and commitment to justice that characterize righteous (*ṣāliḥūn*) and wise (*ḥukamāʾ* and *rāshidūn*) individuals.

Indeed, Prophet Muhammad's mission as the seal of prophethood is to teach the Book and wisdom (2:129; 3:164; 62:2). As Sūrat al-Nisāʾ states: "Allah has revealed to you the Book and wisdom and taught you what you never knew. Great [indeed] is Allah's favor upon you" (4:113). In addition: "Since We have sent you a messenger from among yourselves—reciting to you Our revelations, and to cause you to grow in purity, teaching you the Book and wisdom, and teaching you what you never knew. So remember Me; I will remember you. And thank Me, and never be ungrateful. O believers! Seek comfort in patience and prayer. Allah is truly with those who are patient" (2:151–54). This signifies not just that seeking knowledge is important, but that equally as essential is the ability to apply that knowledge wisely and practically in one's life, in order to make sound judgments and live in accordance with Allah's truth. Thus, through articulating the mission of Prophet Muhammad, a connection is made between *ʿilm*, *rushd*, *ḥikma*, and *iṣlāḥ*: *ʿilm* is the foundation, which requires *rushd* and *ḥikma* to properly implement, and the result is *iṣlāḥ*.

The following sections will briefly highlight some key concepts related to wisdom, as taught by the Qurʾān through the examples of the prophets.

### *Tawḥīd and Tawakkul*

The Qurʾān highlights Prophet Ibrāhīm's (Abraham) pursuit of conviction in faith through logical observation of the natural world, leading him to conclude that only the One who created the heavens and Earth could be his Lord (i.e., *tawḥīd*) (6:75–82). His life was a testament to his complete trust in God (*tawakkul*), regardless of the situation he was facing (21:51–71; 37:94–111). Standing firm against the social norm of idolatry required immense courage (19:41–50). The instances within his life that are presented in the Qurʾān, many of which involved great hardship and sacrifice, exemplify his unwavering submission to the divine will, as well as demonstrate the wisdom of putting one's trust in Allah's wisdom and plan, even when it surpasses human understanding.

### *Mercy*

The Qurʾān describes Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as "a mercy to the worlds" (21:107) and emphasizes that "The Messenger of Allah is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in Allah and the Last Day and remember Him often" (33:21). As his wife ʿĀʾisha, one of the Mothers of the Believers, stated, "[His] character was the Qurʾān" (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 746), thereby indicating that his actions, conduct, and way of life were a living embodiment of its teachings. For example, when he and his companions faced intense opposition and violence in Mecca, he displayed remarkable patience and forgiveness. After years of persecution and exile, he returned peacefully, pardoned his former enemies, and offered a general amnesty. Even when wronged, Prophet Muhammad prioritized justice for others: "By an act of mercy from Allah, you [O Prophet] were gentle in your dealings with them. Had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them. Consult with them about matters, then, when you have decided on a course of action, put your trust in Allah: Allah loves those who put their trust in Him" (3:159). The Prophet would regularly console his companions, along with family members, the needy, and children in their times of suffering and misery (9:128). The Qurʾān presents him as "a mercy to the worlds," for his wisdom was intrinsically linked to mercy and compassion. Similarly, chaplains, as well as anyone else trying to cultivate wisdom, should understand that their own interactions with others should be grounded in mercy and compassion.

### *Gratitude*

Prophets Sulaymān (Solomon) and Dāwūd (David) are presented as examples of wisdom, a trait gifted to the both of them due to their profound gratitude to Allah. Allah granted David, who was a just and wise ruler, a strong kingdom and wisdom, taught him what He willed, and commanded him and his family to: "Work, O family of David, in thankfulness to Me" (34:13). Both prophets are portrayed as deeply grateful for Allah's blessings and the wisdom which He bestowed upon them. The Qurʾān states that they both acknowledged Allah's favor by saying, "Praise be to Allah Who has favored us above many of His believing servants" (27:15). Their gratitude is a key aspect of their wisdom and exemplary

character. From this, one can conclude that part of the process of gaining wisdom is acknowledging and showing gratitude to Allah for the blessings which He has given.

### *Patience*

The accounts of prophets Nūḥ (Noah) and Ayyūb (Job) highlight immense patience. Nūḥ tirelessly conveyed Allah's message for centuries, while Ayyūb endured severe trials with unyielding faith and patience. These examples serve as powerful lessons in enduring difficulties with unwavering trust in Allah. Patience does not mean always being passive, but actively enduring something while maintaining a positive and hopeful attitude, taking the necessary steps to deal with the situation or person, and strategically preparing for what lies ahead—all of which are manifestations of wisdom.

### *Supplication (Duʿāʾ)*

The Qurʾān strongly emphasizes the significance of *duʿāʾ* (supplication) as a way of connecting with Allah, presenting it as a form of worship that embodies humility, dependence, and trust in Allah's mercy and wisdom. Muslims are encouraged to use this method to seek guidance, protection, and blessings in all circumstances. Prophet Yūnus's (Jonah) supplication in the whale's belly is a powerful example of seeking refuge in Allah during a time of great distress. Allah has promised to respond to those who call upon Him. Although His response may not always be immediate or what is specifically requested, Allah's wisdom and mercy ensure that the supplication is answered in the best possible way. *Duʿāʾ* fosters hope and positivity, reminding believers that Allah is always listening and knows what is best for them.

## IV. Prophet Ibrāhīm's Wisdom: A Role Model in Building Future Generations

Prophet Ibrāhīm's prayer for righteous offspring is a great example of envisioning the future with wisdom: "O my Sustainer! Endow me with the ability to judge [between right and wrong], and make me one with the righteous. Grant me the power to convey the truth unto those who will come after me" or in another translation, "My Lord! Grant me wisdom and join me with the righteous. Bless me with honorable mention among later generations" (26:83–84).

The Qurʾān highlights Prophet Ibrāhīm's wisdom in his concern and prayers for future generations, serving as a role model for believers when it says, "Indeed, Allah chose Adam, Nūḥ, the family of Ibrāhīm, and the family of ʿImrān above all people [of their time]. They are descendants of one another. And Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (3:33–34). Prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) is a pivotal figure who exemplified a profound vision for the future, not just for his immediate family, but for his descendants and humanity as a whole. The question is how he demonstrated this vision.

### *Prayers for Future Generations*

The Qurʾān illustrates his wise vision through Prophet Ibrāhīm's frequent supplications and prayers for his offspring. This encourages persistence in prayers for children's well-being and guidance, remembering that Allah hears all supplications. Ibrāhīm's prayer, "My

Lord! Bless me with righteous offspring" (37:100), emphasizes his wish for virtuous children who will make positive contributions to the world. This highlights his foresight and desire for his children to inherit and continue his legacy of devotion to worshipping the One True Creator.

Ibrāhīm's prayers also reflect his vision for a future generation, after his immediate children, that would be submissive to Allah and uphold Islam's (i.e., the true, timeless religion of submission to the One True Creator) rituals and practices. He prayed for a messenger from among them who would guide them with divine verses and wisdom (2:129). This prayer was answered with the coming of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as explained by the Qurʾān in 3:164 and 62:2, as well as by the Prophet himself: "I am the answer to the prayer of my father Ibrāhīm" (*Sīrat Ibn Hishām*, 1/166; *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* 1/566).

### *Envisioning and Establishing a Legacy of Faith*

Ibrāhīm and his son Ismāʿīl (Ishmael) established a firm foundation upon which their vision of a legacy of faith for multiple generations to come could be realized, both through their supplications and through their actions. They built the Kaʻba in Mecca, thereby establishing a central sanctuary for the worship of Allah, near to where their children were settled. Ibrāhīm's supplications, "My Lord, make this city secure, and save me and my children from worshipping idols" (14:35) and "So make the hearts of [believing] people incline toward them" (14:37), reveal his concern for his children's spiritual well-being and protection from harmful influences. It is important to think of how to protect future generations from any form of idolatry and disbelief, and so to this end, he prayed to Allah to raise from among his descendants a messenger: "Our Lord! Raise from among them a messenger who will recite to them Your revelations, teach them the Book and wisdom, and purify them. Indeed, You are the Almighty, the All-Wise" (2:129).

In his plea to Allah, "My Lord, make me and my descendants keep up prayer (*muqīm al-ṣalāt*). Our Lord! Accept my supplications" (14:40), one learns the importance of instilling the love of *ṣalāt* in children, setting a good example, and encouraging a strong connection with Allah. While Prophet Ibrāhīm's prayers emphasize seeking blessings and guidance for his offspring and their adherence to monotheism, Prophet Muhammad's mission had a broader scope: establishing a global community of Muslims (*umma*). The Qurʾān emphasizes the universal nature of Muhammad's (peace be upon him) message, and thus the concept of *umma* transcends tribal, ethnic, and geographical boundaries, uniting believers under the banner of Islam.

## The Significance of the Shift

This transition from a familial focus to a universal one reflects the evolving needs and context of humanity's spiritual journey. While Prophet Ibrāhīm's prayers laid the groundwork for monotheism through a chosen lineage, Prophet Muhammad brought a message for all humanity, emphasizing the shared belief in Allah and promoting justice, equality, and compassion. The Qurʾān states that "He [Allah] gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good" (2:269).

Based upon this verse, Ibn Kathīr (c. 1300–1373) explained that while prophets were blessed with a unique and profound level of wisdom—a wisdom which allows them to deeply understand and effectively spread the message they were entrusted with—Allah, in His mercy, has enabled other individuals to also cultivate and acquire wisdom through sincere striving, seeking knowledge, contemplating the Qurʾān, and reflecting on Allah's signs in the universe (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 1:711). The Qurʾān provides countless examples of wise men and women who benefited the world, who are recognized for their wisdom, righteousness, and significant roles in human history.

What were their decisions, and why did the Qurʾān mention them? How can people implement a similar level of wisdom in their lives? What are the choices that should be made today?

## V. A Practical Implementation of *Ḥikma*: Luqmān's Advice

One of the figures of the Qurʾān who is most associated with wisdom is Luqmān, whose story is narrated within its own dedicated chapter. The chapter begins with a call to those seeking to inculcate wisdom: "Alif, Lām, Mīm. These are the verses of the Book, rich in wisdom. [It is] a guide and mercy for the good-doers…" (31:1–3).

Reading the Qurʾān as one structural unit—which involves not only studying Sūra Luqmān but also connecting it to the themes found in the surrounding *sūra*s—enables us to understand an in-depth meaning of wisdom. By following Luqmān's advice, believers learn how to live in accordance with divine guidance and cultivate the qualities essential for a righteous and purposeful life. Sūrat al-Rūm, which precedes Sūra Luqmān, focuses on Allah's signs in the universe, preparing the reader to appreciate the universal nature of Islam's message. Sūra Luqmān then demonstrates how to embody this message through personal and familial conduct. Thus, Sūrat al-Rūm provides the theological framework, emphasizing Allah's Oneness and wisdom; then Sūra Luqmān provides a practical roadmap for implementing this message in one's daily life, through embodying wisdom and righteous conduct. In this way, these consecutive *sūra*s complement each other.

Luqmān's advice to his son (31:12–19) is considered by Islamic scholars a timeless guide for nurturing responsible and wise individuals who are effective trustees on Earth.

### *Tawḥīd*

Luqmān's first and most crucial piece of advice is to not associate partners with Allah (*shirk*), an act which is the highest form of injustice (31:13). Believing in and worshipping Allah alone is the ultimate act of justice, for it acknowledges Him as the sole Creator, Provider, and Sustainer—all of which is the Creator's rightful due. This principle promotes and fosters a sense of accountability, encourages ethical conduct, strengthens trust in Allah, and reminds the individual that Allah knows and will judge all actions. Luqmān's teachings connect the core belief in Allah's Oneness with the virtue of gratitude (*shukr*) for His

blessings, fostering a positive and humble relationship with the Divine, cultivating resilience and a positive outlook, and helping individuals appreciate life's favors.

### *Gratitude*

Luqmān's story is introduced by connecting wisdom with gratitude, with Allah telling us: "Indeed, We blessed Luqmān with wisdom, [saying,] 'Be grateful to Allah, for whoever is grateful, it is only for their own good. And [as for] whoever is ungrateful, then surely Allah is Self-Sufficient, Praiseworthy'" (31:12). Gratitude is to acknowledge the good in one's life by counting one's blessings and thanking whoever contributes to one's happiness in this life and the hereafter. In a ḥadīth, Prophet Muhammad said, "He who does not thank people does not thank Allah" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1954; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4811). Gratitude naturally leads to humility, which forms a foundation for acting justly and upholding what is right. By recognizing this, individuals are motivated to live a life aligned with Allah's guidance and to express their appreciation for His favors by seeking to please Him. As gratitude cures a multitude of toxic emotions, believing in Allah is the foundation of true justice. A grateful heart leads to a desire to act justly and compassionately toward others. Recognizing Allah's blessings motivates treating others with fairness and kindness, which reflects one's gratitude and justice.

The question is: Do you consider yourself to be in a state of gratitude? If so, how do you demonstrate this?

### *Honoring Parents*

Parents, the direct cause of our existence, are a direct means of Allah's blessings and play a crucial role in our upbringing and well-being. The Qurʾān's emphasis on respecting and caring even for one's parents with different beliefs promotes harmonious family relationships and underscores the significance of family values. Acknowledging their sacrifices fosters humility and appreciation; honoring them sets a positive example for children and contributes to building respect and righteousness within society. Honoring parents is not just a societal norm, but also an act of worship, one intertwined with faith and gratitude to Allah. While the Qurʾān maintains treating them with kindness and gratitude, it does set a clear boundary when their beliefs contradict the *tawḥīdī* worldview: "If they strive to make you associate with Me anything about which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them. Yet keep their company in this life according to what is right, and follow the path of those who turn to Me. You will all return to Me in the end, and I will tell you everything that you have done" (31:15). Note that this respect has limits when it comes to compromising one's core beliefs, and the Qurʾān offers teachings that demonstrate this balance (29:8; 31:14–15).

The verses referenced above explicitly state that if parents pressure children to associate partners with Allah, they should not be obeyed. However, even when disagreeing with parents on matters of faith, the Qurʾān instructs Muslims to continue treating them with kindness, respect, and due consideration in worldly affairs. As upholding one's faith in Allah remains the primary obligation, no earthly relationship can override this fundamental principle. Muslims are encouraged to pray for their parents' well-being and

guidance to the right path. The Qurʾān exemplifies the relationship between believers and their non-believing parents through its account of Prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) (6:74; 9:114; 19:41–49; 26:69–89; 43:26–28; 60:4). Although his father rejected Ibrāhīm's message and even threatened to stone him, Ibrāhīm consistently addressed him with respect and affection ("O my dear father"), prayed for his forgiveness and guidance, and was concerned about the potential punishment he might face in the hereafter. Ibrāhīm only dissociated himself from his father when the latter insisted on rejecting the truth. This account reflects his admirable qualities: compassion and tender-heartedness, dedication to the truth, fulfillment of promises, and trust in Allah's mercy and guidance.

### *Murāqaba: Awareness of Allah's Knowledge*

Luqmān reminds his son that Allah is aware of all actions, an echo of which appears in, "Even if it be anything equal to the weight of a grain of mustard seed... Allah will bring it forth. Verily, Allah is Subtle, Well-Aware" (31:16). This instills a sense of accountability and encourages individuals to act with integrity and make thoughtful decisions. He teaches this deep meaning of "Allah is with me everywhere" through the metaphor of the mustard seed: The tiny mustard seed serves as a powerful illustration of the scope of Allah's knowledge and mercy. This practical example of teaching children to have awareness of Allah's presence (*taqwā*) should be used to guide children in developing their relationship with the Creator and the creations around them. This approach helps them broaden their imagination by, for example, reflecting on rocks and what is living under or above them. When *taqwā* is cultivated, acts of worship, such as *ṣalāt*, transform from mere rituals into a profound connection with Allah. A *taqwā*-filled heart leads to sincere and focused prayer.

### *Establishing Prayer (Ṣalāt)*

*Ṣalāt*, a fundamental practice that strengthens one's connection with Allah, nurtures oneself and others, provides a sense of discipline and purpose, and guides individuals and communities toward righteous actions. An act of justice and gratitude, it is considered Allah's right upon His creation, as well as the acknowledgment of His sovereignty and generosity, and is a fulfillment of the duty to worship Him, thereby affirming His Oneness. Establishing prayer cultivates self-mindfulness and purity; develops a sense of personal and communal justice, equity, and compassion; motivates individuals and communities to promote what is right and forbid what is wrong; and bridges the spiritual connection between one's relationship with the Creator and one's efforts toward justice and peace. The shift within Sūra Luqmān from Luqmān's wisdom and advice to highlighting the grandeur of Allah's creation is a powerful reminder of Allah's abundant blessings upon humanity (which should engender humility, gratitude, and prayer), as well as a powerful argument against those who deny or dispute about Him (31:20–34).

### *Promoting Good and Forbidding Evil*

Luqmān advises his son to advocate for justice and righteousness and to oppose evil. This teaches responsibility toward society and highlights the importance of taking moral stances, even in the face of adversity. These "golden rules" encompass the core values of

righteousness, community service, and resilience, all of which form the foundation of an upright and steadfast individual (31:17).

### *Patience*

Luqmān emphasizes active patience (*ṣabr*) when facing challenges and difficulties, for doing so brings great reward from Allah: "My dear son, establish *ṣalāt*, and bid the good and forbid the evil, and bear with patience what befalls you. Surely this is among the matters [requiring] determination" (31:17). However, patience does not mean to endure oppression and evil forever, as the Prophet's (peace be upon him) life shows. By accepting the mission given to him by Allah, he began to struggle against the societal ills, paganism, and injustice afflicting his people. The profound and comprehensive concept of *ʿazm al-umūr* can be translated as "steadfastness in matters," "matters requiring resolution," or "a resolution to aspire to," based on its usage within the Qurʾān. It signifies a strong determination and firm resolve when confronting such situations, especially when doubts or weaknesses may arise. This phrase, often linked with patience and forgiveness (*ghufran*), suggests that true resolve lies in enduring hardship and maintaining a positive outlook even during adversity (3:186; 42:43). The Qurʾān emphasizes that believers will be tested in their wealth, lives, and through hurtful statements from others and it encourages them to seek Allah's assistance through patience and prayer.

### *Ethical Conduct and Personal Development*

Luqmān urges his son to walk modestly and speak gently, for these approaches foster mutual respect and strengthen community bonds: "Do not turn your nose up at people, nor walk about the place arrogantly, for Allah does not love arrogant or boastful people" (31:18). The Qurʾān's narration of Luqmān's interaction with his son is a stirring portrayal of parental mentorship. His words are laced with gentle guidance, nurturing not just obedience but also fostering understanding and respect. In short, mentorship, especially from a parent to a child, should be rooted in love, patience, and empathy.

### *Moderation*

Luqmān advises moderate behavior and speech to promote dignity, self-control, and a balanced approach to life: "Be moderate in your pace. And lower your voice, for the ugliest of all voices is certainly the braying of donkeys" (31:19). The tone of voice plays a pivotal role in effective communication. A soft tone can convey empathy and understanding, thereby fostering a sense of closeness and trust. Conversely, a sarcastic tone can cause hurt and misunderstanding, creating distance. This explains and demonstrates the steps for enhancing healthy and harmonious relationships that may lead to building a just and peaceful family, community, and society.

### *Universally Relevant*

The narrative of Luqmān presents a comprehensive and universal roadmap for people who strive to cultivate wisdom in their lives. Indeed, this and other lessons found in the Qurʾān's

verses are presented as timeless and universally applicable to all individuals and societies, regardless of time, type of civilization, and location.

## VI. Role Models in the Qurʾān Who Embody Wisdom

Beyond the examples of the prophets and of Luqmān, the Qurʾān provides other models of wisdom from which one can learn, some of which are mentioned below.

***The Queen of Sheba, a lesson in wisdom in governance and justice:*** The Qurʾān illustrates, in Sūrat al-Naml's account of the Queen of Sheba, a wise leader who protected her nation and the world around her from a disastrous war. This queen was a powerful ruler, who recognized the truth and submitted to Allah during the time of Prophet Sulaymān. Her wisdom was reflected in her careful consultation with her advisors (27:32–33), her cautious and strategic decision-making (27:34–35), and her recognition of truth and subsequent submission to Allah (27:44).

***Dhul Qarnayn:*** A believer and just ruler who was given great means to fulfill his mission, Dhul Qarnayn used his knowledge and power to serve people and spread justice and peace wherever he landed. His story was mentioned in Sūrat al-Kahf, in verses 83 to 98.

***A believer from Pharaoh's people:*** The Qurʾān praises this believer for his courageous defense of Moses's true message, despite the risks involved. He approached Pharaoh and his advisors wisely, using different styles of arguments, tones, and even emotions to try to convince them of the truth (40:28–45).

***Pharaoh's wife:*** She is revered as an example of strong faith, courage, and steadfastness in the face of oppression, despite being the wife of a tyrant (66:11). Her wisdom was revealed through her empathy in saving the infant Moses (28:9); she became his foster mother, raising the man who would one day become a prophet, and later accepted the truth of his message—in spite of her husband's opposition and oppression.

***Moses's mother:*** The Qurʾān describes how the mother of Moses received divine inspiration to place her baby in a basket in the river, ultimately leading to his safety and later return to her care. Her story demonstrates her unwavering faith and trust in Allah during challenging times (28:7–13), something that is an essential aspect of true wisdom.

***Moses's wife:*** Her keen observation and insightful assessment of Moses's character, and the resulting advice she gave to her father, reveals her wisdom in choosing the right spouse: "O my father, hire him. Verily, the best of men for you to hire is the strong, the trustworthy" (28:26; the full story is narrated in 28:23–28). Her suggestion demonstrates practical wisdom, in recognizing Moses's valuable qualities that would benefit her father and their household. This advice led to Moses being hired and subsequently marrying her, which played a crucial role in his journey prior to prophethood.

***Maryam's mother:*** This woman, who had vowed to dedicate her unborn child to Allah's service, was wise when planning for the future of her children and the generations after her. She made *duʿāʾ* for her unborn child, and Allah answered this *duʿāʾ*, entrusting Maryam to the care of Prophet Zakariyyā (Zechariah) (3:37)—and leading Maryam down her path of righteousness, a righteousness revered by billions of people since then.

***Maryam (Mary) al-Ṣiddīqa:*** Maryam, the mother of Prophet ʿĪsā (Jesus), is referred to as al-Ṣiddīqa: "And his mother was one who never deviated from the truth," and in

another translation, "the woman of truth" (5:75). This highlights a key aspect of her character. She is revered, across religions, as an exceptionally pious and virtuous woman who embodied deep wisdom through her devotion to Allah from a young age. Under Zakariyyā's guardianship, Maryam was nurtured in an environment of faith and piety (3:35–45). Her story exemplifies steadfast faith and trust in Allah's plan. She accepted Jesus's miraculous conception and endured trials during childbirth with patience. Facing accusations, she put her full trust in Allah that He would save her from this hardship (19:16–36). Her life shows us that Allah rewards steadfastness and protects those who seek Him. The qualities which she embodied are all necessary characteristics for someone who wants to cultivate wisdom, and her narrative continues to inspire a life of purpose and devotion to Allah for those who read it.

***The Mothers of the Believers:*** This is a title of honor given to Prophet Muhammad's wives, due to their high status, their sacrifice, and the respect owed to them by believers. The Qurʾān highlights this high status and sets them apart as examples for all Muslims. Throughout their lives, they demonstrated extraordinary faith and sacrifice by choosing to stay with the Prophet (peace be upon him) despite difficult circumstances (33:28–29). Allah entrusted them with conveying the message and wisdom: "[Always] remember what is recited in your homes of Allah's revelations and [Prophetic] wisdom. Surely Allah is Most Subtle, All-Aware" (33:34). To this end, these great women played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the Prophet's teachings, and they were frequently sought by other companions as well as early scholars of the next generation for advice; particularly ʿĀʾisha (may Allah be pleased with her), who was renowned for her knowledge and memory. Their actions demonstrate the importance of obeying Allah and His Messenger, seeking knowledge and wisdom, and serving the community.

***Khawla bint Thaʿlaba:*** Renowned for her courage and wisdom in challenging an unjust marital practice (*ẓihār*) and seeking divine intervention, her case resulted in a positive resolution and a revelation stated in the Qurʾān. Her account highlights the importance of standing up for justice, seeking redress from the appropriate authorities, and trusting in Allah's mercy and wisdom. Khawla not only rejected the practice of *ẓihār*, but she appealed directly to the Prophet for guidance. Allah responded by revealing Sūrat al-Mujādila verses 1 to 4, directly addressing her situation and providing a solution for her and for women in generations to come. These verses clarified that a man's wife is not his mother and that a specific expiation is required to reconcile the spouses. This emphasizes that all human relationships are designed by Allah, not by the words of people. Another important lesson this incident illustrates is how the Prophet used wisdom to advise and guide Khawla and her husband, Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit, to rectify the situation. The verses mandated that Aws free a slave, or fast for two consecutive months, or feed sixty poor people. Sūrat al-Mujādila was revealed to document her experience, so that people could always derive valuable lessons from it.

## PART TWO: THE MEANING AND IMPACT OF THE LACK OF WISDOM IN CHAPLAINCY

The liminal nature of Islamic chaplaincy makes it imperative that persons in this space exhibit wisdom. As Muslim chaplains often find themselves negotiating between conflicting paradigms, acting wisely in these encounters is of paramount importance. In this second part of the paper, the discussion on wisdom continues, with a focus on how to define the lack of wisdom, as well as the impact this lack of wisdom may have on the practice of chaplaincy.

The Qurʾān addresses various aspects related to the lack of wisdom or sound judgment, often using different terms to describe their underlying state or characteristics. Some of the key terms and concepts are listed below.

### I. Defining the Lack of Wisdom

***Jahala (ignorance)*** is the rejection of innate nature, an absence of common sense, a darkness of the heart, and the inability to distinguish right from wrong (33:72; 5:50; 2:273). It is often associated with arrogance, egoism, and following desires, as well as with someone who constantly ignores advice and acts impulsively: "The [true] servants of the Most Compassionate are those who walk on the earth humbly, and when the foolish (*al-jāhilūn*) address them [improperly], they only respond with peace" (25:63). This verse highlights that true believers respond to foolish behavior and ignorance only with gentleness and understanding, in an attempt to help them to reflect, realize, and correct their mistakes. The opposite of *ḥikma*, its root word (*j-h-l*) has the additional connotations of foolishness, ignorance, impulsiveness, a state of complete unawareness (6:54 and 111; 7:138; 11:29; 27:55), and a lack of knowledge and wisdom (46:23). This word occurs twenty-four times in the Qurʾān, in six forms. The Qurʾān warns people against remaining ignorant: "Be gracious, enjoin what is right, and turn away from those who act ignorantly" (7:199) and "Moses responded, 'I seek refuge in Allah from acting foolishly'" (2:67).

Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) defined *jahl* as foolishness or the comprehension of something in a manner contrary to its true reality (Al-Iṣfahānī 2014). This contrasts with the typical definition as being merely a lack of knowledge. He refers to simple ignorance as a lack of knowledge about a particular subject or topic, something that one can rectify through personal effort. However, the problematic form of ignorance entails considering a false belief or misunderstanding as the truth. The third category of ignorance is when one has knowledge but acts contrary to it: "O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance (*bijahāla*) and become, over what you have done, regretful" (49:6). The Qurʾānic framework encourages individuals to acquire knowledge and cultivate wisdom, in order to lead them to embodying *istiqāma* (steadfastness) (Ibn Taymiyya 2002).

***Lā yaʿqilūn (those who do not understand or use their intellect):*** Wise individuals always seek to learn and accept counsel, while foolish individuals tend to resist guidance and to repeat mistakes. The Qurʾān frequently highlights the importance of using one's intellect (*ʿaql*) to comprehend and follow the truth. Those who fail to do so are described as lacking understanding (2:170–171; 5:103).

***Safaha*** generally means foolishness, ignorance, or a lack of wisdom, particularly regarding matters of faith and divine guidance. Verses 2:12–13 describe how *safaha* can lead to *fasād* (corruption or mischief). Hypocrites are a prime example of this, for they prioritize worldly benefits and view fulfilling their duties to Allah and their acts of worship as burdens and unimportant. Verse 6:140 describes the killing of children, especially daughters, in such terms, identifying that those who do so do it out of *safahā* (foolishness) and *bighayri ʿilm* (without knowledge, i.e., out of ignorance). This thus shows the deleterious consequences of foolishness. Prophet Hūd's people accused him of being a fool: "The disbelieving chiefs of his people responded, 'We surely see you as a fool (*safāha*), and we certainly think you are a liar.' Hūd replied, 'O my people. I am no fool. But I am a messenger from the Lord of all worlds, conveying to you my Lord's messages. And I am your sincere advisor'" (7:66–68).

In this context, *safaha* refers to a perceived lack of sound judgment that leads people to reject divine messages. Those who rejected Ibrāhīm's faith are described as those who fool themselves: "And who would reject the faith of Ibrāhīm except a fool (*safiha*)! We certainly chose him in this life, and in the Hereafter he will surely be among the righteous" (2:130). While *safīh* describes foolishness or a lack of wisdom, *safah* can imply a deliberate lack of sense or indulgence. *Safīh* can also mean a weak or feeble-minded person: "But if the debtor is feeble-minded (*safīhan*), weak or unable to dictate, then let his guardian dictate justly" (2:282).

***Ghafla (heedlessness):*** This term emphasizes being unmindful of Allah and one's divine purpose. It implies a lack of vigilance and alertness due to a preoccupation with worldly matters and neglect of spiritual obligations (7:146, 179, 205; 10:7; 18:28; 46:5).

## II. The Consequence of the Lack of Wisdom

The Qurʾān details the root causes of these negative consequences. This process begins with the inner self when the person cannot develop self-reflection, a reality that later manifests in his/her actions. Verses 4:116–121 explain Satan's plan to draw people away from worshiping Allah, the Creator:

> Surely Allah does not forgive associating [others] with Him [in worship], but forgives anything else of whomever He wills. Indeed, whoever associates [others] with Allah has clearly gone far astray. Instead of Allah, they only invoke female gods and they [actually] invoke none but a rebellious Satan, cursed by Allah—who said, "I will surely take hold of a certain number of Your servants. I will deceive them and incite vain desires in them, and I shall command them—and they will cut off the ears of cattle [in idolatrous sacrifice]; and I shall command them to alter Allah's creation." And whoever takes Satan as a guardian instead of Allah has certainly suffered a tremendous loss. (4:116–119)

Those individuals, who fall for Satan's plan due to a lack of true self-reflection, will be guided by their desires and will create corruption and mischief on earth: "Have you considered the one who takes his own desires as a deity and whom, in His knowledge, Allah lets him go astray [i.e., leaves him to his own desires]" (45:23). As a result, one will

follow anything, anyone, and any path. Thus, Allah warns people against following Satan and their inner lower desires (24:21). He also proclaims:

> And relate to them the story of the one to whom We gave Our signs, but he abandoned them, so Satan took hold of him, and he became a deviant. If it had been Our will, We could have used these signs to raise him high, but instead he clung to the earth and followed his own desires—he was like a dog that pants with a lolling tongue whether you drive it away or leave it alone. Such is the image of those who reject Our signs. Tell them the story so that they may reflect. (7:175–176)

It is important to note that had this person made the choice to heed the signs sent to him and to rectify his beliefs and character, Allah would have guided him further and raised him in status. However, because this person rejected the signs he was given, Allah then allowed him to go further astray. From this, we learn that in His infinite wisdom, Allah the All-Wise has given us the ability to make a choice between guidance or misguidance—between wisdom or foolishness—and He then responds to us accordingly.

The Qurʾān defines those who lack wisdom as misguided, astray (i.e., they do not consider the possible negative consequences), and without any clear end goal (i.e., they lead an aimless life and have no sense of accountability) (14:3). They allow themselves to be led by false leaders rather than take accountability for their own pursuit of the truth and their own decisions: "And they will say, 'Our Lord! We obeyed our leaders and elite, but they led us astray from the [Right] Way'" (33:67) and "So that is Allah, Your Lord, the True—what is there, beyond the True Allah but falsehood?" (10:32). Furthermore, the Qurʾān details how some people lose their way and then encourage others to join them, thereby themselves becoming these leaders of falsehood: "And [so] Pharaoh led his people astray and did not guide [them rightly]" (20:79).

Regardless of what they have done, however, Allah the Most Merciful provides opportunities for people to change their ways and to recognize the truth: "Indeed, We afflicted Pharaoh's people with famine and shortage of crops so [that] they might come back [to their senses]" (7:130). But if people insist on rejecting the truth, "their fate is that of the people of Pharaoh and those before them—they all disbelieved in Allah's signs, so Allah seized them for their sins. Indeed, Allah is All-Powerful, severe in punishment" (8:52).

The Qurʾān also states: "[Remember] the tribes of ʿĀd and Thamūd: Their history is made clear to you by [what is left of] their dwelling places. Satan made their [evil] deeds appealing to them, hindering them from the [Right] Way, although they were capable of reasoning. [Remember] Qārūn and Pharaoh and Hāmān: Moses brought them clear signs, but they behaved arrogantly on Earth. They could not escape Us" (29:38–39). Foolish individuals tend to resist guidance, repeat the same mistakes, and not consider the potential consequences of their actions. **The Qurʾān reveals their final destination:** "And [beware of] the Day when the wrongdoer will bite his own hand [in regret] and say, 'Oh! I wish I had followed the Way along with the Messenger! Oh, woe to me! I wish I had not taken that one as a friend. It was he who truly made me stray from the revelation after it had reached me'" (25:27–29). The Qurʾān affirms: **"Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves**. And if it is Allah's Will

to torment a people [due to their own evil deeds], it can never be averted, nor can they find a protector other than Him" (13:11).

From these verses, we learn that not only does a lack of wisdom lead to further ignorance (in its various forms) within the individual, but it also leads to the propagation of ignorance, injustice, and oppression within society, as well as punishment and regret in the Hereafter.

## III. The Characteristics of Unwise People

***Arrogance, the rejection of truth:*** Those who lack wisdom are characterized within the Qurʾān as choosing disbelief and mockery even after being presented with truth. Blinded by their own arrogance and rejecting clear evidence, they say, "We surely reject what you believe in" (7:76), thereby causing tremendous damage for themselves and for others: "And [so] Pharaoh led his people astray" (20:79). Various individuals and groups, often associated with their rejection of Allah's guidance and their arrogance, are frequently presented as cautionary tales of the results of foolishness.

**Pharaoh** is a prominent example of someone who exhibited extreme arrogance and wickedness by refusing to acknowledge Allah and His messenger Moses, while claiming divinity for himself (79:24). Despite witnessing Allah's powerful signs, Pharaoh denied and refused to believe, ultimately drowning in the waters that Allah enabled Moses to part as he led his people out of Egypt. This event reminds people of the consequences of pride and rebellion against Allah (8:54; 10:90–92).

Known for his immense wealth and arrogance (due to his pride and ignorance), **Qārūn** attributed his wealth to his own knowledge and competence. His refusal to give charity and his opulent displaying of wealth led to Allah's punishment: The earth swallowed him and his dwelling place. Qārūn's story warns against the dangers of arrogance, greed, and the misuse of Allah's blessings (28:76–81).

***Lack of consideration*:** Foolish decisions are often made without proper thought or considering the potential consequences. The Qurʾān highlights the foolishness of those who are easily swayed, especially when the offered opinions are based on falsehood or ignorance, for they cannot discern truth from falsehood (14:21; 34:31–32; 40:47).

***Ignoring counsel:*** People may disregard even well-intentioned advice. The Qurʾān provides numerous examples of individuals and groups who opposed the prophets with foolish arguments and actions. These examples are warnings to future generations about the dangers of doing so (7:75–78, 88–92, 130–133; 10:75).

***Emotional reactivity:*** Foolish decisions are often driven by strong emotions, which cause those who mock the believers and their practices to disrespect other people's beliefs and perspectives. The Qurʾān always encourages disputants to follow the ethics of disagreement and to dialogue with others in a polite manner (2:256; 16:125; 40:28–45).

***Hypocrisy*:** The Qurʾān often criticizes hypocrites, namely, those who seek to undermine the Muslim community via their foolish actions and words, based on deceit and self-deception. These men and women undermine trust, damage relationships, hinder personal and spiritual growth, and promote unethical behavior (e.g., 24:11–21). Sūrat al-Munāfiqūn (The Hypocrites) specifically addresses and exposes their characteristics,

among them: deceptive behavior, insincere claims, and attempts to undermine the Muslim community (63:1–11).

These examples illustrate the dangers of lacking wisdom, resulting in various forms of arrogance, ingratitude, and rejection of Allah's guidance.

## IV. Why Wisdom is Important

Cultivating wisdom helps believers to develop a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, navigate life's challenges, and learn from their experiences. In Ṣuhayb ibn Sinān's famous narration, he states: "We were sitting with the Messenger of Allah. Suddenly, the Prophet (peace be upon him) started to laugh. We said to the Messenger: 'Why are you laughing?' The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, 'How amazing it is to be a believer! There is good for him in everything and this applies only to a believer. If prosperity attends him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him. And if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is better for him'" (*Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, no. 27; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2999). This highlights the fact that believers express gratitude to Allah when they experience positive circumstances and demonstrate patience and resilience when faced with difficulties. This perspective helps them improve their decision-making by considering the potential consequences and long-term impact of their action(s). Wisdom allows people to adapt to new situations and challenges by leveraging their knowledge and experience gained from past events and the associated lessons learned.

Such abilities foster empathy, understanding, and trust-building with others, all of which lead to healthier and more fulfilling relationships. When individuals possess *ḥikma*, they are naturally inclined toward *iṣlāḥ*, defined here as striving to correct what is wrong, healing divisions, and working for positive change in their lives and in their communities. The Qurʾān encourages a long-term perspective because it considers the consequences of actions in this life and the afterlife. Regular prayer, reflection, and remembrance of Allah are encouraged in order to cultivate inner peace and connect with the Divine. Each Muslim's foundational framework begins with a *tawḥīdī* worldview: worshiping Allah, activating this belief in one's life by doing good deeds, and contributing positively to society.

## V. How to Cultivate and Embody Wisdom

The Qurʾān presents humans as trustees of Allah on Earth, accountable for their actions and their impact on the planet and on society. Its framework for a purposeful life emphasizes a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, intellectual, moral, physical, social, and environmental development in the pursuit of both worldly success and eternal reward. The prophets and messengers served as role models who embodied the divine revelations and teachings, providing humanity with clear answers and instructions on the purpose of existence; moral, ethical, and spiritual laws; and how to live righteously. This framework, often referred to as *tarbiya* (nurturing), is a lifelong process of self-purification, character improvement, and moral excellence guided by faith and doing good deeds.

Therefore, wisdom can be cultivated and acquired through sincere striving, seeking knowledge, contemplating the Qurʾān, and reflecting on Allah's signs in the universe.

*Tadabbur* (deep reflection on the Qurʾān), is crucial for gaining spiritual insight and wisdom. It involves understanding the verses' contexts and meanings, asking thoughtful questions about applying them in one's life, and allowing the message to resonate deeply in one's heart and mind. The starting point of this journey of wisdom is the building of a relationship with the Qurʾān, which leads to cultivating *taqwā*—thereby softening the heart and strengthening self-reflection, awareness, and evaluation.

The steps to making a change include inculcating self-accountability, having an accountability ally (a *walī*),[7] turning to Allah in repentance, and maintaining a sincere intention. All of these allow one to develop wisdom, following the Prophetic model in building a compassionate self, family, and community (Alwani 2019, 106–108).

Some additional ways to cultivate and embody wisdom include:

***Building taʿāruf:*** "[O] People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman and made you into nations and tribes so that you should know one another (*taʿārafū*) [and not to despise each other]. In the sight of Allah, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware" (49:13).

***Next, taʾāluf:*** "Hold fast to Allah's rope all together; do not split into factions. Remember Allah's favor to you: you were enemies and then He brought your hearts together (*faʾallafa bayna qulūbikum*) and you became brothers by His grace; you were about to fall into a pit of Fire and He saved you from it—in this way, Allah makes His revelations clear to you so that you may be rightly guided" (3:103).

***Tawāṣu:*** "By the [passage of] time! Surely humanity is in [grave] loss, except for those who believe, do good deeds, and join together (*tawāṣaw*) in the mutual teaching of truth, and of patience and constancy" (103: 1–3). The Qurʾān provides a comprehensive plan to build healthy relationships among believers, starting with self-accountability, then with the family, and then in society:

> The believers, both men and women, are guardians of one another. They encourage good and forbid evil, establish prayer and give *zakāt*, and they obey Allah and His Messenger. It is they who will be shown Allah's mercy. Surely Allah is Almighty, All-Wise. Allah has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens under which rivers flow, to stay there forever, and splendid homes in the Gardens of Eternity, and—above all—the pleasure of Allah. That is [truly] the ultimate triumph. (9:71–72)

Wisdom is essential when giving advice, especially to children, youth, new Muslims, and others who are developing faith. For example, Muslim chaplains must be aware that the West has large Muslim communities, many of whom originate from all over the Muslim world. Thus, what may have been appropriate in one place may not be so in another. In all cases, the Qurʾān emphasizes, "Invite [all] to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord [alone] knows best who has strayed from His Way and who is [rightly] guided" (16:125). It is important to

[7] The concept of an "accountability ally" or a *walī* (pl. *awliyāʾ*) is one that is found in the Qurʾān (*al-muʾminūna wa-l-muʾminātu baʿḍuhum **awliyāʾu** baʿḍ*). It focuses on the ideas of being a partner, guardian, and supporter in a shared journey (9:71–72).

address people in a compassionate way and resist the temptation to give into one's (perhaps unconscious) feelings of superiority, cultural biases, personal preferences, racial/gender attitudes, and opinions. Instead, be understanding, tolerant, compassionate, and patient toward others, just as the Prophet (peace be upon him) was with his companions. This will lead to healthy collaboration.

***Taʿāwun (collaborating in doing good and establishing iṣlāḥ):*** "Cooperate with one another (*taʿāwanū*) in goodness and righteousness, and do not cooperate in sin and transgression. And be mindful of Allah" (5:2).[8]

## VI. Identifying and Evaluating Significant Life Decisions and their Impact

Life is a tapestry woven from countless decisions, each one shaping the unique narrative of our existence. Some decisions, like choosing what to wear in the morning, have minimal impact, while others can profoundly alter our personal trajectories and even ripple outward to affect our families, communities, societies, and the world. Such decisions can range from pursuing higher education or changing careers, to marriage or divorce, to advocating for social change, to changing ideologies or beliefs, or to adopting sustainable practices. Significant life decisions profoundly affect our personal well-being, happiness, and sense of self. Therefore, a lack of wisdom can lead to lower life satisfaction at the personal, familial, and societal levels.

***Familial impact:*** Personal choices can significantly influence family relationships and dynamics. For example, choosing a life partner, deciding to start a family, or even accepting a job offer has a ripple effect on the lives of those closest to oneself. **Family decision-making processes**, where all members feel valued and heard, can lead to healthier relationships and stronger family bonds. Conversely, unbalanced power dynamics in families can lead to conflict and emotional harm.

***Communal impact:*** Individual choices can have a collective impact on communities. Engaging in acts of service, volunteering, or advocating for causes can drive positive social change.

***Societal impact:*** Choices collectively shape society, influencing social norms, cultural values, and even economic systems. The impact of choices can vary, depending on socioeconomic status; for example, those in lower-income brackets may face greater constraints and potentially more pronounced consequences. For Muslims, one model of the societal impact of individual choices stands clear: The *Zakāt*-based system is a divine mechanism that should uplift individuals from dependency to self-sufficiency, turning *zakāt* recipients into future *zakāt* givers. This model warrants deep reflection. What could be the potential societal impact of this profound system?

***Global impact:*** In an increasingly interconnected world, individual choices can even have global implications. This can be true as regards resource consumption, environmental sustainability, climate change, and international relations.

[8] See more on the concepts of *taʿāruf*, *taʾāluf*, and *taʿāwun* in pp. 106–108 of Zainab Alwani, "Transformational Teaching: Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a Teacher and Murabbī," *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2019): 91–119.

## VII. Evaluating the Impact of Your Decisions: A Reflective Exercise

To aid readers, particularly Muslim chaplains, in identifying the significant decisions they may face and evaluating the impact of those decisions, consider the following questions:

*Identifying Significant Decisions:*

- What have been some of the most significant choices in your life so far?
- What different options were considered for each decision?
- What were the reasons for choosing the path taken?
- What major life decisions are anticipated in the future?

*Evaluating Impact:*

- *Personal:* How did each decision impact your overall well-being, happiness, and sense of self? Did it bring you closer to becoming the person you are striving to be? How did you cope with the consequences? What lessons have you learned from the experience?
- *Familial:* How did each decision impact relationships with family members? Did it create or resolve conflict? How did it influence family dynamics?
- *Communal:* How did your choices affect involvement in your community? Did you contribute to any positive or negative changes?
- *Societal:* Did your actions influence social norms or contribute to broader societal trends? Did you consider the ethical and social implications of your decisions?
- *Global:* Did any of your decisions have implications for environmental sustainability or international relations? Did any of your decisions affect the Muslim *umma* and other people in other parts of the world?

By reflecting on these questions, a deeper understanding of the power of choices and their potential to shape life and the world can be gained. It is through this self-reflection and self-accountability process—guided by sound knowledge and *tadabbur*—that one can develop wisdom. Remember: Decision-making (as well as wisdom) is a continuous process of learning and adaptation. Embrace the responsibility and potential that comes with making choices and use them to create a fulfilling and meaningful existence.

## Conclusion

From the discussion and analysis presented in this article, one can see that the Qurʾān and its Prophetic application can be a rich seminal resource for recruitment, training, and in-service support of Muslims serving as chaplains in Islamic and non-Islamic spaces. This same methodology of Qurʾānic and Prophetic analysis can be used to explore other concepts of relevance to chaplains. It is important for Muslim chaplains who are building curriculums and standards based on the Qurʾānic-Prophetic model to understand that even other faith traditions can learn from the particular approach outlined in this paper. This is especially true given that the broader field of chaplaincy is still very much in flux when it comes to training and standards.

This article explored the concept of *ḥikma* (wisdom) within the Qurʾān and the Prophetic application for Muslim chaplains providing holistic spiritual care. The article argued that by re-centering chaplaincy on this Qurʾānic-Prophetic model of wisdom, chaplains can offer spiritual care and enhance pastoral counseling that is both authentically Islamic and profoundly relevant to the complex psycho-spiritual needs of Muslims today. It concluded by discussing the implications for chaplaincy training and practice, suggesting that integrating this wisdom-centric approach can foster greater spiritual resilience in individuals and communities, and can strengthen the overall development of the Muslim chaplaincy profession and beyond.

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# The Illuminating Lamp: A Four-Step Model for Islamic Chaplaincy in North America

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## Abstract

*This article presents a four-step framework for Islamic chaplaincy in North America, derived directly from the Qurʾānic description of the Prophet Muhammad as a witness, bearer of good news, warner, and beacon of light (Qurʾān 33:45–46). Rooted in foundational Islamic sources, this model offers Muslim chaplains a structured sequence of actions that build upon one another, providing a focused approach to spiritual care. The model emphasizes a God-centered, holistic vision that integrates service (khidma), compassion (raḥma), love (maḥabba), and ongoing self-purification (tazkiya), while honoring the sanctity of the care seeker's physical, emotional, and spiritual journey. By following the four-step progression—witnessing, affirming goodness, offering gentle correction, and inviting toward divine connection—chaplains can align their technique and interventions with the Prophetic example while also engaging thoughtfully with contemporary chaplaincy practices. The framework encourages chaplains to cultivate presence (ḥuḍūr), ethical restraint , and compassion, equipping them to serve with theological integrity and pastoral wisdom. Rather than treating psychological relief as an endpoint, Islamic chaplaincy orients care toward holistic well-being in this world and the Hereafter. The article concludes by affirming the necessity of mentorship, accountability, and continuous self-refinement for Muslim chaplains, ensuring that their work*

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*remains a sincere reflection of the Prophetic model of service. In offering this framework, the authors seek to contribute a distinct and faithful paradigm to the broader field of spiritual caregiving, one that is both rooted in Islamic tradition and responsive to the diverse realities of contemporary practice.*

***Keywords:*** *Islamic chaplaincy, spiritual care, prophetic ethics, God-centered care, clinical pastoral care*

## Introduction

Islamic chaplaincy is a profound journey of service, embodying principles rooted in Islam's values and teachings. This model draws from a divine framework guided by service (*khidma*), love (*maḥabba*), compassion (*raḥma*), and the centering of God in every interaction (*tawajjuh*). Unlike many present-day psychosocial approaches to chaplaincy that are methodologically non-theological—rooted in postmodern philosophical approaches such as treating revelation as non-authoritative and spirituality as individually constructed (Doehring 2006)—Islamic chaplaincy encourages a God-centered approach, emphasizing the chaplain's role as a *khalīfa* (steward of God's creation) who is actively engaged in an ongoing spiritual effort of self-refinement in the service of others. This approach is inspired by the Qurʾān and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, whom God sent as the most exemplary guide for humanity. Accordingly, our critique targets the underlying worldview of psychosocial models (e.g., authority without revelation), not the methods themselves. Techniques from these models, such as assessment, reframing, reflecting listening, and drawing on trauma research, remain instrumentally valuable when re-anchored in *tawḥīd*. As with contemporary uses of yoga or meditation detached from Hinduism and Buddhism, psychosocial practices may yield benefit; however, once severed from their spiritual sources, the purpose and limits of the practices shift (Antony 2018). While a full analysis of postmodern spiritual care frameworks lies beyond this article's scope, this paper argues for reintegrating psychosocial methods widely used in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) within a God-centered framework (i.e., retaining the tools while reframing their ultimate aim).

In presenting a model for Islamic chaplaincy in North America, it is essential to adhere to the values, framework, and faith tradition that guide Muslim chaplains. Chaplains are known as caregivers; however, their role extends beyond this as they receive and respond to what the care seeker needs. Each encounter represents a sacred moment, not just between two human beings, but one facilitated by the Divine. Operating from a God-centered worldview, Muslim chaplains understand that every being is a part of creation brought into existence by the Creator. Therefore, their role is to provide comfort, hope, and compassion, acting as a conduit between God and the care seeker—without coercion or proselytizing—not merely to provide care, but also to embody God's love and guidance in every encounter. In practice, this means leveraging psychosocial techniques where appropriate while anchoring aims in revelation and Prophetic guidance. This sacred calling

is deeply rooted in witnessing the care seeker's journey as part of a broader, eternal path, thereby acknowledging his/her reality and destiny both in this world and the next.

The chaplain recognizes the soul's journey and guides the care seeker with compassion and respect for this spiritual continuity. Understanding life's temporality, particularly the reality of death, helps the chaplain approach each encounter with humility and empathy, acknowledging the sanctity of the care seeker's soul. The Muslim chaplain is deeply aware that life on Earth is merely one stage in the journey of the human soul; a soul which has existed in the pre-eternal realm, resides briefly in this worldly life (*dunyā*), and continues through the intermediary state after death (*barzakh*), before reaching the Hereafter (*ākhira*), culminating in the Day of Resurrection. Such awareness underscores the centrality of death and temporality, which, when accepted, often marks a person's spiritual strength. Understanding how one relates to their soul, life, death, and purpose is vital to making meaning out of life's experiences. This insight allows the chaplain to embody etiquette (*adab*), honoring the care seeker's journey with empathy and reverence, while recognizing the latter's inherent sanctity as a soul navigating life's challenges and joys.

This ability to witness both the worldly and otherworldly dimensions of a person's existence is fundamental to Islamic chaplaincy. The chaplain understands that each moment in this temporary life directly connects to the care seeker's eternal journey. As such, every encounter must embody an invitation to The Real (al-Ḥaqq), serving as a bridge to the care seeker's ultimate well-being in the Hereafter. This perspective affirms that health is not a morally or spiritually neutral concept. Rather, in Islam, true well-being (*ʿāfiya*) encompasses not only physical, neurological, and psychological health, but also moral and spiritual wellness. This involves caring for both the care seeker's immediate and eternal needs, striving to help them achieve balance and well-being in this world and the next. This holistic approach acknowledges that true health is inextricably linked with the soul's journey and relationship with God, adding a transcendent element to the care a Muslim chaplain offers and one which grounds their service to humanity squarely in the roots of the Islamic tradition.

Through this God-centered approach, Muslim chaplains help others navigate their challenges not by imposing, but by meeting them where they are and offering compassion, wisdom, and guidance. In the Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad perfectly embodied this approach, and thus his appearance, speech, relationships, and lifestyle offer profound guidance for Muslim chaplains. A four-step model for Islamic chaplaincy can be derived from the following:

> O Prophet! We have sent you as a **witness**, a **bearer of good news**, a **warner**, and as **one who invites to God**, by His permission, as a beacon of light. (Qurʾān 33:45–46)

These Qurʾānic verses highlight the Prophet's mission as a guide for humanity to connect with their Creator. Ultimately, a Muslim chaplain is simply an individual seeking to fulfill the Prophetic mission of helping humanity to realize this potential. Therefore, he/she strives to emulate this role by serving as a witness, a bearer of good news, a warner, and a beacon of light (steps 1–4). While the chaplain has a defined understanding of the human

purpose and journey, this is for his/her knowledge in determining spiritual assessments as opposed to imposing his/her own solution. The Muslim chaplain must offer care that meets care seekers where they are in their spiritual journeys and stages of faith, aiming to unite Creator and creation.

This paper draws from these verses to derive chaplaincy practices that address the holistic nature of the human being, considering both their physical and spiritual existence as per the Prophet's mission. In doing so, it aims to shed light on how Islamic chaplaincy can uniquely nurture and care for the human spirit.

## Step 1: Witnessing God and the Care Seeker

### *The Act of Witnessing*

In Islamic chaplaincy, witnessing involves seeing the care seekers as they truly are, both in this world and the next. Unlike frameworks that focus solely on one's physical or psychological well-being, it considers the care seeker's spiritual welfare. For Muslims, this is encapsulated in the concept of *ʿāfiya* (holistic well-being), which includes physical, emotional, and spiritual health. A Muslim chaplain witnesses the care seeker through the lens of divine guidance, striving to see each individual as God sees them—worthy, dignified, and connected to the soul's larger journey. This act of witnessing goes beyond providing care; it involves becoming a living example of the values one wishes to impart.

To be a witness (*shāhid*) to another human being is a transformative act of care. The beauty of chaplaincy often lies in the practitioner's ability to create a space in which the care seeker feels fully embraced and welcomed. To this end, the act of witnessing requires establishing a stillness that allows the care seeker to be present in an environment of safety, compassion, and warmth. In such an environment, truth can manifest, and the care seeker feels seen and understood. In his seminal work, *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk emphasizes that feeling understood has a profound effect on our physiology (van der Kolk 2014). Research demonstrates how the brain changes when people feel truly seen and heard. Social support, whether in a community of many or just two people fully present with one another, is the most powerful protection against trauma and stress. This example encourages us to be present for others with full attention, fostering connection as an antidote to trauma.

Every human soul is a unique creation of God, and each encounter is an opportunity to extend a sincere, loving gaze that heals and uplifts. Muslim scholars of spirituality held the view that merely the gaze of a friend of God could impact the state of others (Al-Ghazālī 2015, 45). However, this sincere gaze can only be given when chaplains acknowledge that they themselves are being witnessed by God. For the believer, witnessing another person's condition is intimately grounded in witnessing the Divine Source. As caregivers, chaplains witness the care seeker from the vantage point of the chaplain's connection to God, striving to see the ennobled Adamic child ("*wa laqad karramnā Banī Ādam*") who is before them (Qurʾān 17:70). When chaplains consider God's name, al-Ḥaqq—that God is the Real, the Truth, and in Witnessing the Truth—they can come to witness the care seeker's true condition. Interestingly, the Islamic tradition contains a link between seeing God and being

seen by God, as exemplified in the Ḥadīth Jibrīl, when the Prophet responds: "It is to worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, then, He sees you" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 50). When one internalizes that one is constantly being seen by God, chaplains can extend that sacred gaze to those they care for, offering the care seeker the same sense of compassion, acceptance, and love that one experiences from our Creator.

### *Witnessing Through the Prophetic Example*

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) serves as the ultimate example of witnessing, as he was a witness to God before he was a witness to humanity in terms of embodying mercy, compassion, and guidance. As Muslim chaplains, we are called to emulate this role, witnessing others with compassion and understanding. Part of the act of witnessing is to stand as a model for others, and so chaplains bear witness both for and against themselves through what they exhibit in the world. As the Prophet stands as a true witness over us by providing a model for us to follow, chaplains are called to witness humanity by embodying the Prophetic message of mercy and guidance: "And so we made you a justly balanced community so you may be witnesses over humanity, and the Messenger is a witness over you" (Qurʾān 2:143).

According to the Sīra, the Prophet's followers loved him greatly and desired to sit with him for as long as possible, "for when he spoke to anyone he would turn to him so fully and make him so amply the object of his attention" (Lings 1983, 221). He exemplified this through small gestures, such as never being the first to withdraw from a handshake, allowing others to take as much time as they needed (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 231). As narrated by Anas ibn Mālik, the Prophet told a woman, "Sit in any street you wish, and I will sit with you until I fulfill your need" (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 334). This reflects his deep commitment to being fully present for others; an essential part of the act of witnessing. Spiritual care guides often emphasize active listening, teaching us to stop fidgeting, turn our bodies toward the other person, and listen attentively.

The Arabic word *ḥuḍūr* stems from the root *ḥa-ḍa-ra* (ح-ض-ر), which means "to be present" or "to attend" (Wehr 1994, 214). Etymologically, *ḥuḍūr* conveys the state of being present not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually. It encompasses an awareness and attentiveness that transcend mere physical attendance, thereby implying a deeper engagement with the moment. In Islamic mysticism, it represents a state of heightened spiritual awareness, one in which God's presence is felt continuously. Students of the science of purification of the heart (*tazkiya*) often seek to cultivate this state of constant awareness of and connection to the Divine, known as *ḥuḍūr al-qalb* (presence of the heart), regardless of external circumstances. In essence, *ḥuḍūr* is more than mere physical presence—it is a state of spiritual consciousness where one's heart, mind, and soul are fully attuned to the presence of God; i.e., where they are witnessing God.

From an Islamic and spiritual perspective, *ḥuḍūr* is often understood in relation to one's presence before Allah. It reflects a state of mindfulness and spiritual awareness (*taqwā*), one in which the believer is conscious of God's omnipresence and always strives to act with sincerity and devotion. In this sense, *ḥuḍūr* signifies a heart fully attentive to divine guidance and immersed in worship, and it implies an inner stillness and focus where the distractions fade away.

Chaplains are being given the gift of sitting with a care seeker in his/her most vulnerable state of heart. When invited into this sacred space of conversation, one assumes the role of both host and guest. As hosts, one offers the best of oneself to the other person, and as guests, one allows the other to take the lead, savoring their time together. This dynamic requires the chaplain to be humble and open, and to actively listen, as taught by the Prophet, tailoring one's approach to meet the other's unique needs. The Muslim chaplain's heart is fully attentive to God through practicing *ḥuḍūr*, thereby granting a stillness, alertness, and humility that allows him/her to fully focus on the needs of God's creation—truly witnessing them as they are. Through this sacred exchange, one embodies the Prophetic tradition of care and presence.

### *Preparing Our Disposition: Adab*

The act of witnessing requires the chaplain to approach the care encounter with *adab* (proper etiquette and conduct), which includes balancing one's own internal state to reflect the Divine in every interaction. Thus, it is not about the words one says, but about the state of one's heart. One must clear away all internal distractions and impurities to witness the care seeker with sincerity and clarity. Emotional regulation is fundamental to improving the quality of the interaction and allowing for a care seeker to be served in the greatest capacity. Chaplains continuously cleanse their hearts of negative traits, such as arrogance, impatience, or condescension, to be vessels of God's light. By doing so, they lift others and offer them genuine guidance and support. True witnessing involves being honest with oneself in the moment and understanding that God is the source of all that is to occur, allowing one to respond rather than react. This internal regulation—managing urges to fix, advise, or comment—helps create an internal environment that manifests externally as a calm and inviting presence, which communicates attentiveness, love, and awareness so that the care seeker has space to show up as he/she is. By removing the weeds of the *nafs* (ego) so they can be in constant contact with God's light, chaplains lift people up and help others.

### *Witnessing in an Age of Loneliness*

In today's world, where loneliness is pervasive, the act of witnessing another person becomes even more critical. Often, individuals feel unrecognized, unvalidated, and disconnected. Muslim chaplains' task is to affirm the intrinsic worth of each care seeker and remind them of their connection to their Lord. Recognizing these individuals' divinely given spirit (*rūḥ*) offers them an opportunity to see themselves as God intended—worthy and significant. Witnessing also involves helping them clear away barriers, distractions, and confusion so their hearts and souls can find a direct path to the Divine. Therefore, the chaplain must function as a mirror that reflects these individuals' potential, encouraging them to recognize and embrace their inner light.

In summary, the goal of witnessing is to offer peaceful stillness, compassion, and love, while recognizing that this gaze is rooted in being witnessed by God Himself. This acknowledgment enables chaplains to see the care seeker clearly, allowing them to offer sincere, transformative care that connects the individual back to his/her Creator.

**Step 2: A Bearer of Good News**

In times of crisis, the opportunity to discover meaning surfaces in various ways. Some revive and internalize what they already know theoretically from a religious tradition, and others must renew meaning. In the end, it's always God's timing and God's way on the path. Prophet Muhammad knew this, and thus served as a gentle guide who was patient with people's individualized journeys to God while consistently choosing to see each person's potential rather than the unrefined version presently manifesting.

***The Goodness of Human Nature***

Bringing good tidings (*tabshir*) is fundamentally about instilling hope, particularly when an individual feels overwhelmed or trapped by despair. This role involves reminding them of God's mercy, compassion, and omnipresence, thereby helping them rediscover the light of divine guidance in times of darkness. A crucial aspect of this process is affirming the human being's inherent dignity and goodness, as God has honored humanity by granting them an elevated status (Qurʾān 17:70). The chaplain achieves this by recognizing and validating the care seeker's strengths and qualities, such as expressing empathy, dedication, or resilience. Statements like, "I see that you care deeply for your family," or "Your efforts show immense strength," serve to affirm the care seeker's experience and sense of self.

This process stems from the act of witnessing, where the chaplain holds what the care seeker shares with sacred confidentiality, vulnerability, and trust. In doing so, the chaplain bears witness to the individual's journey, affirming his/her struggles and strengths as part of his/her divinely ordained path. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified this approach by never leaving anyone in a state of despair but instead offering them hope and encouragement. For example, when a young child grieved for the death of a pet bird, the Prophet showed empathy and acknowledged the pain, validating these feelings in a tender and compassionate manner (Al-Tirmidhī 2007, ḥadīth 337). In more trying circumstances, such as a family member's death or the suffering of the oppressed, the Prophet always demonstrated a deep understanding of human sorrow and uplifted and comforted those around him. By doing so, he laid out the approach for Muslim chaplains: offer hope, compassion, and affirmation and guide them gently back to the path of divine connection.

Islam teaches that human beings are inherently good, and the chaplain's role is to affirm this goodness even in times of despair. Prophet Muhammad exemplified this in his interactions, always comforting, encouraging, and lifting others, regardless of their circumstances. His approach was not one of harshness or immediate condemnation, but of compassionate engagement, gentle guidance, and unwavering belief in a person's capacity for transformation. A Muslim chaplain, following this Prophetic model, fosters trust, hope, and a sense of divine closeness for those struggling with despair. By expressing *ḥusn al-dhann* (a good opinion of others) and responding with wisdom, chaplains do not merely counsel or advise—they become a vessel for mercy and divine guidance, encouraging the care seeker to return to his/her innate goodness and connection with Allah.

Such expressions foster a hopeful attitude, grounded in a good opinion of God, that with Allah's help and guidance, individuals can navigate their challenges. This belief

instills confidence that individuals possess the necessary tools to overcome difficulties and discover the answers and meanings they seek in their experiences. After the first revelation, Prophet Muhammad returned home trembling and overwhelmed by fear and confusion. In this moment of vulnerability, his wife Khadīja exemplified the qualities of a chaplain via compassionate reassurance and validation. She listened with empathy and acknowledged his fear without dismissing or minimizing it. More importantly, she affirmed his noble character, reminding him of his long-standing virtues—his kindness to kin, generosity to the poor, support for the downtrodden, and commitment to truthfulness (Lings 1983, 51–52). By doing so, she offered a profound reminder of God's love and favor upon him, assuring him that God would not abandon someone of such moral excellence. Her words not only comforted him in his moment of distress, but also reinforced his sense of divine purpose and mission, thereby illustrating the power of compassionate chaplaincy rooted in both empathy and affirmation.

The Prophetic emphasis on maintaining a good opinion of others is especially relevant in the context of Islamic chaplaincy. For Muslim chaplains, the care seeker is viewed as a fellow "child of Adam," a being honored by God above all creation (Qurʾān 17:70) and into whom God has breathed His spirit (Qurʾān 15:29). This recognition compels the chaplain to approach care seekers with compassion, encouraging them to embrace their potential and aspire to their highest selves. The chaplain is, therefore, guided to have *ḥusn al-dhann* in the care seekers' capabilities, affirming their inherent strengths and assuming the best in them. Islamic chaplaincy's approach emphasizes a sincere recognition of all care seekers' inherent worth and potential. Rather than simply affirming all aspects of their perspective, the chaplain strives to highlight their God-given strengths and noble qualities. This sincere affirmation, grounded in the belief that every person has a divinely inspired potential, encourages the care seeker to aspire to his/her highest self while fostering an authentic, compassionate connection with the chaplain.

An essential aspect of listening is serving as a mirror, reflecting the intrinsic goodness present within everyone. A Muslim chaplain helps the care seeker become aware of his/her connection to God, as this awareness distinguishes a spiritually attuned perspective from one that denies the existence of the spirit (*rūḥ*), God, or the spiritual realm altogether. The chaplain's approach affirms and reinforces the care seeker's realization that he/she possesses a *rūḥ*, a divine spirit bestowed by God.

Providing a space for reflection allows people to discover their inner resources and abilities. The chaplain's responsibility is to help clear away the barriers, distractions, and confusions that impede one's journey, thereby enabling the heart or *rūḥ* to find a direct path to the Divine. This process facilitates the care seeker's reconnection with his/her true self and strengthens his/her relationship with God.

To bear good news and bring good tidings is to offer hope when all seems lost. This act involves affirming the care seeker's strengths and reminding them of God's mercy. In his teachings, Prophet Muhammad encouraged hopefulness, even in difficult situations, demonstrating how to uplift others through kindness and compassion.

**Step 3: Warning or Directing the Care Seeker**

Change is a process. God sent revelation over a period of 23 years. Healing follows a lengthy timeline. Human beings evolve over time. Relationships are a process. Like everything in life, spiritual development happens in stages. Thus, guiding someone toward spiritual growth requires patience and wisdom. The chaplain must carefully assess when to provide direction, ensuring that it is offered with love and at the appropriate time. This echoes the approach of the Prophet, who always paired his warnings with compassion and understanding, ensuring that his guidance was rooted in genuine care (Qurʾān 3:159).

Prophet Muhammad reinforced the Qurʾān's clear warnings—warnings that were initially delivered to the people of seventh-century Mecca, a society that was distant from recognizing the divine truth of God's Oneness (*tawḥīd*). One must note that he did not begin his mission of warning against corruption, injustice, and transgression until he reached the age of forty. By that time, he had already established himself as a man of such integrity and trustworthiness that he was known as "al-Ṣādiq" (the truthful) and "al-Amīn" (the trustworthy). The Prophet's life was marked by his exemplary character—having nurtured relationships with his family and community—which allowed him to deliver his message from a position of respect and credibility. This deep foundation of trust meant that even those who opposed his message could not separate his noble character from the warnings he conveyed.

Islamic teachings emphasize that guidance must be offered within a framework of love and trust. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, demonstrated this approach in his interactions, such as when he patiently nurtured his companions' faith before guiding them toward more profound spiritual truths. For example, when a bedouin urinated in the mosque, rather than reacting harshly, the Prophet calmly instructed him on the sanctity of the space, thereby establishing an environment of trust and understanding (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 220).

However, despite this established trust, not everyone readily accepted his message. While human beings possess an inherent potential for goodness, they are also susceptible to being driven by their lower desires. For this reason, warnings are necessary to protect humanity from falling into harm due to these inclinations. But ultimately, God guides whom He wills. The Prophet's approach emphasizes that delivering such warnings must be grounded in compassion, empathy, and established trust. Without first witnessing and building a relationship with those whom one seeks to guide, any attempt to issue a warning can be ineffective or even detrimental. Timing is crucial, for issuing a warning prematurely can harm the individual, while delivering it too late may result in missed opportunities for growth. Therefore, the chaplain or caregiver must exercise wisdom, delivering guidance tactfully and at the appropriate moment, with the ultimate aim of removing harm and guiding others toward a path of light and goodness. Therefore, a Muslim chaplain must first cultivate this sense of safety and connection before offering guidance, recognizing that any form of direction without the groundwork of love, empathy, and trust can feel harsh, even harmful, and may be perceived as a breach of the sacred trust that exists within the care encounter.

In this context, once the chaplain has fulfilled the essential steps of witnessing both God and the care seeker and has established a relationship built on trust, affirmation, and an acknowledgment of the latter's inherent dignity, he/she may then be in a position to offer guidance or direction. As this stage can be particularly challenging, the underlying foundation of the prior steps has to be firmly established. Unfortunately, an untrained or inexperienced chaplain might attempt to prematurely guide or advise before building the necessary trust and rapport, not realizing that a caregiver or chaplain needs a significant degree of spiritual maturity, particularly in exercising restraint at the outset of the relationship with the care seeker. This maturity involves demonstrating patience, allowing trust to develop, and ensuring that any future guidance, redirection, or advice is more likely to be received positively. As practitioners are frequently confronted with diverse situations, ranging from grief and confusion to hope and pain, the ability to discern the appropriate response in any given circumstance is essential. Although some interventions may not be relevant in every context, chaplains must not overlook any step in the broader process of human growth and spiritual development.

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, exemplified this approach by displaying immense love and compassion, always desiring the best for humanity and guiding them toward their highest potential through God's transformative power. Muslim chaplains must similarly recognize where they are situated in the process of guiding someone toward God, whether that involves initial witnessing, building trust, or offering direct guidance. Some encounters may require more emphasis on one stage than another; however, the foundational steps should never be neglected, nor should one remain in a stage that requires progression. This approach involves a form of spiritual assessment and triage, which is rooted in an understanding of the Prophetic tradition of spiritual care, ensuring that each interaction is handled with wisdom, patience, and a genuine desire for the care seeker's growth and connection to the Divine. Only when the care seeker feels genuinely safe, understood, and valued will he/she be receptive to potentially uncomfortable truths or directions.

### *Offering Guidance and Naṣīḥa (Advice)*

> This Book has been sent down to you [O Prophet]—let there be no anxiety in your heart because of it—so that you may use it to give caution and to remind the believers. (Qurʾān 7:2)

In Sūrat Āl-ʿImrān, God reminds the Prophet to act with gentleness: "By an act of mercy from God, you [O Prophet] were gentle in your dealings with them—had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you" (Qurʾān 3:159). This verse highlights the importance of empathy and connection before correction, a principle that echoes through many of the Prophet's interactions.

Islamic teachings emphasize the etiquette of offering advice (*naṣīḥa*), grounding it within a framework of compassion, privacy, and humility. The ideal method is in a private, one-on-one setting during which a tone of love and gentleness is maintained. One must avoid any sense of superiority or self-righteousness, as these attitudes can undermine the sincerity of the guidance and diminish its effectiveness. *Naṣīḥa* should be offered in a way

that is both creative and tailored to the individual's unique circumstances, as exemplified by Ḥasan and Ḥusayn (may Allah be pleased with them) when they gently and tactfully corrected an elder's performance of *wuḍūʾ* (Lings 1983, 102).

Anas ibn Mālik recounts an incident where Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, responded with patience and empathy to a grieving woman who initially rejected his counsel. Rather than scold or judge the woman for her rejection of the Prophet's advice, he simply walked away. Perhaps the grieving woman's raw reaction informed the Prophet that she was cognitively and emotionally unable to reason due to her overwhelming emotional state. This story underscores the importance of timing, empathy, and understanding when offering advice. Only when the woman realized that the Prophet was the one delivering the advice and sought his forgiveness did the Prophet remind her that "patience is at the first strike (*al-ṣabru ʿinda al-ṣadmat al-ūlā*)" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1283). When the woman approached the Prophet herself, she may have demonstrated a receptivity to receive. We learn from this encounter that *naṣīḥa* must be delivered with patience and at the most appropriate moment. This approach aligns with the broader Qurʾānic principle that divine guidance and laws are intended to serve not as punitive measures but as compassionate guidance. Notably, even when the woman was at her most vulnerable, the Prophet sought to guide her, illustrating the Prophet's profound understanding of human resilience and capacity.

This principle stands in contrast to the often lower expectations placed upon human capacity in psychosocial frameworks, which may prioritize immediate comfort over long-term spiritual growth. From an Islamic perspective, recognizing that all human states are meant to direct one to God is critical in facilitating holistic well-being and spiritual growth. By maintaining this expectation, chaplains actively facilitate the individual's journey toward realizing his/her higher self.

An additional consideration in offering *naṣīḥa* is the concept of advice as a form of charity (*Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn*, no. 693), whereby the chaplain offers the *naṣīḥa* for the care seeker with an open palm rather than dropping it from up top (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1442). For example, the Prophet, peace be upon him, offered advice, rather than compelling it, by frequently prefacing his advice to his companions with, "Shall I not inform you of...," thereby ensuring that his counsel was welcomed and respected.[1] This practice serves as a powerful reminder of the need to balance the act of imparting wisdom with respect for the individual's autonomy.

Moreover, the technique of reframing is crucial to presenting alternative perspectives in a caring and respectful manner, for it allows chaplains to communicate different understandings and viewpoints in a way that fosters an environment of mutual respect and growth, thereby ensuring that guidance is received as an act of compassion rather than imposition. Through the reframe, the care seeker can consider a different perspective to reflect upon and accept.

To truly listen and respond with wisdom, chaplains must employ *takhliyya*, a process of emptying themselves of preconceived notions and assumptions. A Muslim

[1] See for example *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2606.

chaplain cultivates the ability to engage in spiritual care via minimizing the obstacles of bias, judgment, or unresolved personal wounds. The act of emptying oneself allows chaplains to make space for the care seeker's experiences, creating an atmosphere of hospitality akin to preparing one's home for guests. If chaplains approach the care seeker burdened by their own assumptions or personal struggles, they risk projecting those onto the care seeker, thereby hindering the healing process. By relinquishing the instinct to offer immediate solutions, chaplains open the possibility for deep, meaningful listening.

True spiritual growth comes from first building a relationship, then offering correction, which underscores the importance of the first two steps of witnessing and offering hope. Offering *naṣīḥa* should be done with humility, respect, and an understanding of the care seeker's journey. The chaplain must act with wisdom so that his/her advice will resonate, just as the Prophet's did. His advice was grounded in a relationship of trust and care and, as a result, the hearts of his companions were open to his guidance. This principle highlights the importance of building connections before offering correction or advice. A chaplain must first ensure that the care seeker feels empowered and supported, not burdened or judged.

An individual's cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual development follows a gradual and evolutionary trajectory from childhood to adulthood. Just as physical and mental faculties mature over time, so too does one's spiritual growth. From a theological perspective, Muslim chaplains draw upon the foundational themes of the Qurʾān and Sunna, particularly concepts such as God's mercy (*raḥma*) and the ethical guidelines established by divine revelation. Chaplains must have a nuanced understanding of the influences of the ego (*nafs*) and Satan (Shayṭān), both of which can divert individuals from their path of spiritual progress.

By integrating these theological principles into their practice, chaplains become equipped to offer compassionate guidance, helping individuals to reorient themselves toward spiritual alignment. This process requires them to adapt their approach according to the care seeker's developmental stage and level of spiritual readiness. Essentially, they must assess the individual's position on his/her spiritual journey and respond with the singular objective of guiding him/her toward a closer relationship with God, fostering a pathway that facilitates his/her return to divine connection and purpose.

### Step 4: Inviting to God, By His Permission, and Reflecting Light for the Care Seeker

The central aim of Islamic chaplaincy is connection to God, recognizing that true holistic well-being—spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically—cannot be fully realized without divine connection.[2] Therefore, the model retains contemporary psychosocial techniques but re-anchors them within a God-centered framework. This principle of inviting to God, by His permission, distinguishes the approach not by discarding practice but by redirecting its ends. For Muslim care seekers, this is a natural and accepted framework; the Qurʾān clearly answers the question of human purpose as worshiping or,

[2] "And whoever turns away from My remembrance—indeed, he will have a depressed [i.e., difficult] life, and We will gather [i.e., raise] him, on the Day of Resurrection, blind" (Qurʾān 20:124).

in many works of exegesis on this verse, intimately knowing Allah (Qurʾān 51:56). Regardless of the care seeker's level of practice or where he/she is in his/her spiritual journey, the chaplain's role is to gently remind, encourage, and facilitate the return to Allah in a way that is non-coercive and honors the care seeker's personal struggles. This is rooted in the Islamic understanding of *tawḥīd*, where every difficulty, loss, or internal conflict is ultimately an opportunity to recognize the Oneness of God and turn toward Him *(tawajjuh*).

For care seekers of other faiths or belief systems, this reconnection to the Divine requires a different approach—one that remains anchored in the chaplain's Islamic worldview while engaging others with respect, wisdom, and sincerity. Muslim chaplains may explore the care seeker's own language of connection, assisting them in deepening their current relationship with the Divine. While those of other faiths and belief systems may understand the world differently and hold varying interpretations of spirituality, Muslim chaplains can still invite to God through embodying presence, compassion, and ethical engagement. By seeing such care seekers as honored creations of God—as affirmed in the Qurʾān, "And We have certainly honored the children of Adam" (Qurʾān 17:70)—Muslim chaplains acknowledge the value within every individual given by the Divine and interact through a lens of dignity, respect, and mercy. Even if a care seeker does not recognize God, the chaplain does, and that belief informs their every interaction. This way, the Muslim chaplain's presence itself becomes a reflection of God's mercy, offering care not to proselytize, but to witness, affirm, and gently invite—by Allah's permission—toward deeper spiritual and emotional well-being.

This core principle of inviting to God—without proselytizing or coercion—distinguishes Islamic chaplaincy. Where non-theological frameworks often bracket revelation and treat spirituality as individually constructed, we repurpose assessment, validation, and reframing toward remembrance of God.

A Muslim chaplain approaches spiritual care with the understanding that guidance ultimately belongs to God alone: "It is not for you [O Prophet] to guide them; it is God who guides whomever He will" (Qurʾān 2:272). This principle shapes the chaplain's role, ensuring that his/her focus remains on offering gentle and wise invitations to divine closeness, rather than assuming control over a care seeker's response. Because true help and victory stem only from Allah, the Islamic chaplaincy model is neither coercive nor proselytizing; rather, it is rooted in trusting that God alone changes hearts and brings about transformation. The chaplain's role is not to pressure, convince, or force, but to illuminate the path and allow the care seeker to walk it in his/her own time.

Just as the Prophet, peace be upon him, was commanded to call others with wisdom and sincerity while entrusting the outcome to God, the chaplain engages in compassionate listening, spiritual encouragement, and ethical counsel without attachment to results. This detachment is not indifference, but a conviction that the responsibility of conveying is separate from the responsibility of changing—the latter belongs to God alone. Qurʾān 2:272 further emphasizes that "whatever charity you give benefits your own soul," reinforcing that the chaplain's effort itself—when offered sincerely for the sake of God—carries inherent spiritual reward, irrespective of whether the care seeker accepts or internalizes the guidance. This paradigm ensures that the chaplain remains both steadfast in his/her duty and free from the emotional weight of expected outcomes, embodying a

Prophetic approach to care that is at once deeply engaged and spiritually detached in its reliance upon God's will. It is precisely because outcomes are left to God that Islamic chaplaincy does not seek to control or impose; rather, it offers with conviction, and trusts in divine timing. God is at the center, and chaplains—at best—are only means.

The foundation of Islamic chaplaincy lies in fostering a genuine connection, both with the individual and with God. This work involves guiding the care seeker on his/her journey toward a deeper relationship with the Divine, aligning with the purpose of creation as expressed in the *ḥadīth qudsī*: to worship and intimately know Allah (Ibn ʿArabī 2002, 180). A significant part of this role requires the chaplain to exercise restraint against the inclinations of the lower self (*nafs*) and to recognize that only God bestows true guidance. Given this reality, rather than asserting control, chaplains aim to cultivate a supportive relationship by providing an environment in which the care seeker feels genuinely seen, heard, and understood. Within such a setting, the individual can engage in the processes of self-observation (*murāqaba*) and self-assessment (*muḥāsaba*), which are integral to his/her spiritual development.

In times of crisis, feelings of isolation and uncertainty can serve as catalysts, jolting the care seeker out of a state of heedlessness (*ghafla*) and creating an opportunity for introspection that fosters spiritual growth and divine connection. At such times, chaplains might be tempted to offer advice or judgments; however, these actions often fall short of addressing the care seeker's deeper needs. As the care seeker's narrative is mirrored back to him/her, he/she begins to engage in *tafakkur* (thinking), *tadabbur* (reflecting), and *tadhakkur* (remembering). Islam emphasizes the human being's capacity for deep reflection, reasoning, and contemplation as a means of drawing nearer to God: "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day are signs for people of understanding, those who remember Allah while standing, sitting, or lying on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth" (Qurʾān 3:190–191). Another verse urges individuals to self-reflection: "Do they not reflect upon themselves?" (Qurʾān 30:8). This divine call to introspection invites individuals to examine their past, present, and future to extract wisdom from every facet of life. As the scholar Ḥasan al-Baṣrī observed, "One hour of reflection is better than a night spent in worship (*qiyām al-layl*)," underscoring the value of contemplative thought in spiritual growth (Murata and Chittick 1994, 262).

A significant part of this reflective journey occurs in moments of silence, which is why it plays a pivotal role in chaplaincy encounters. Silence provides the space for care seekers to process their experiences, emotions, and struggles without the pressure of immediate response or guidance. By creating this environment of stillness, chaplains offer individuals the opportunity to find meaning, clarity, and healing on their own terms. For chaplains themselves, silence is not merely a tool, but rather a practice that fosters personal resilience and introspection and allows them to maintain their own sense of calm, cultivating mindfulness and presence in their encounters. This practice serves as a safeguard against the emotional fatigue and burnout often associated with the responsibilities of chaplaincy. Thus, silence within chaplaincy is a dynamic exchange—it serves as a sanctuary for care seekers and a source of renewal for chaplains.

The role of chaplains, following from the example of prophets, involves communicating in a way that resonates deeply with the people they serve. The Qurʾān emphasizes this by stating: "We have never sent a messenger except in the language of his people, to make things clear for them" (Qurʾān 14:4). Similarly, a chaplain's approach must be grounded in wisdom and compassion: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner" (Qurʾān 16:125). By balancing attentive listening, thoughtful reflection, and compassionate guidance, chaplains facilitate care that nurtures both spiritual and emotional growth, always steering the care seeker back toward the Divine Source.

### *Being a Beacon of Light*

Islam is a living tradition of constant flow and direction that must be actively engaged with. To practice Islamic chaplaincy is to return to the core principles of witnessing, affirming, and guiding, all while ensuring that the chaplain's own mirror remains polished, free from the distortions of ego and unchecked assumptions. The chaplain fulfills this role by acting as a source of light, both in terms of alleviating burdens and offering spiritual illumination, reflecting the title "*Sirājan Munīran*" (Illuminating Lamp) that was bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him (Qurʾān 33:46).

For the Muslim chaplain in his/her efforts to embody this Prophetic comportment, the journey demands persistent self-examination and refinement. A memorizer of the Qurʾān traditionally remains in a constant state of revision, ensuring that sacred words remain imprinted in both mind and heart. A true scholar of Islam continuously revisits foundational texts, uncovering deeper insights with each stage of spiritual and intellectual maturation. A spiritual aspirant is never static, always engaged in the work of purifying the heart from that which clouds and darkens it. There can be no stagnancy.[3] *Wuḍūʾ* can only be made with running water, signifying that purification requires motion and renewal. Sustaining the work of chaplaincy necessitates the presence of a skilled teacher, mentor, or guide—someone who can offer wisdom, accountability, and a model for self-refinement. Without such guidance, a chaplain risks mistaking his/her own unexamined perspectives, wounds, or limitations for truth, which may lead to harm rather than healing in his/her interactions. Chaplaincy, by its nature, requires continuous self-examination and ethical responsibility, and having a trusted teacher, coach, or mentor provides an essential safeguard against ego-driven decisions, unchecked biases, and misinterpretations of one's role.

A Muslim chaplain must both offer and receive counsel, learning firsthand the humility of accepting guidance before guiding others. Just as chaplains strive to be beacons of light, they must also seek illumination from those who have walked the path before them, learning how to navigate spiritual, emotional, and ethical challenges with sincerity and balance. Without experiential submission to wise counsel, the chaplain may risk

[3] As reported by ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak: ʿAwn ibn ʿAbd Allāh (may Allah be pleased with him) said, "A man advised his son, saying: 'O my son, you must be mindful of Allah. If you are able to be better today than you were yesterday and to be better tomorrow than you are today, then do so'" (*al-Zuhd wa-l-raqāʾiq*, no. 832).

offering advice without fully understanding its weight or recognizing when a care seeker is truly ready to receive it. A qualified teacher or mentor not only provides insight but also serves as a mirror, reflecting the chaplain's blind spots and areas for growth, ensuring that the latter's service remains rooted in wisdom, patience, and sincerity.

However, not all who assume the role of a guide are suited for it. Some mentors, despite their titles or institutional positions, may lack the self-awareness, integrity, or ethical grounding necessary to guide others effectively. Just as spiritual teachers may be unqualified to lead others in self-purification, so too may some clinical supervisors or educators carry personal biases that hinder rather than facilitate a chaplain's growth. A title alone is not enough—a true teacher must demonstrate deep self-awareness, mastery over his/her own ego, and a history of ethical, transformative mentorship.

A reliable teacher, mentor, or coach must also be under a system of accountability, ensuring that he/she does not misuse his/her authority or lead others astray. Whether through a recognized chain of teachers (*silsila*), institutional oversight, or ethical review structures, mentors themselves should be subject to guidance and correction. The presence of such accountability benefits not only the chaplain but also those he/she serves, as it ensures that both guidance and care remain aligned with principles of justice, integrity, and compassion.

While a skilled mentor may offer valuable psychosocial tools for emotional regulation and self-awareness, his/her guidance—if purely psychological—may not fully address the chaplain's spiritual core from an Islamic perspective. A mentor grounded in Islamic ethics and spiritual purification *(tazkiya*) is especially important in helping the chaplain align ego, intentions, and service with divine guidance. However, in the absence of a sound teacher—whether due to geographic limitations, lack of access, or the prevalence of unqualified alternatives—a Muslim chaplain may turn to the practice of sending abundant blessings (*ṣalawāt)* upon the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. The Prophetic tradition establishes that one who is without a teacher should increase in *ṣalawāt*, for in doing so, the Prophet himself becomes his/her guide and nurturer (*murabbī)*.[4]

This practice is not merely devotional; it is a means of receiving divine openings as well as illumination from the most exalted teacher, whose character, wisdom, and mercy form the foundational model for Islamic chaplaincy. Given that a Muslim chaplain already draws heavily from the example of the Prophet in their pastoral care, deepening this connection through *ṣalawāt* serves as both a spiritual anchor and an active means of guidance. By immersing themselves in the remembrance and love of the Prophet, chaplains cultivate an approach to their work that is spiritually rooted and grounded in self-refinement, one infused with Prophetic gentleness, insight, and sincerity, ensuring that their chaplaincy remains refined, supported, and illuminated.

Thus, the responsibility ultimately lies with the Muslim chaplain to carefully discern the right guides—both clinically and spiritually—who will support his/her journey

[4] "Whoever sends abundant *ṣalawāt* will find the Messenger as their teacher, guiding them in ways they do not perceive." Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tanwīr al-ḥalak fī imkān ruʾya al-nabī wa-l-malak* (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988).

of self-refinement. Only by carefully selecting their mentors can chaplains polish their own spiritual mirrors, ensuring that the light they reflect is free from the distortions of ego, bias, or unresolved wounds. In doing so, they cultivate a presence of true service and divine-centered guidance, illuminating the path for those they serve.

Just as the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was described as an illuminating lamp (Qurʾān 33:46), the chaplain, too, must strive to be a vessel through which divine light reaches others—dispelling darkness with wisdom, compassion, and sincerity. Sound teachers, like well-lit lanterns, support the chaplain's psychological and spiritual growth in a way that is holistic, rooted in divine consciousness, and aligned with Islamic teachings on self-purification. By grounding his/herself in this tradition of seeking knowledge and mentorship, the chaplain does not merely offer guidance but becomes a source of light, embodying Prophetic care with clarity and warmth.

## Conclusion

An Islamic model of chaplaincy is anchored in revelation and Prophetic guidance. Its distinctiveness lies in reintegrating its methods within a God-centered aim, namely witnessing, bearing good news and hope, offering timely and measured guidance, orienting to God, and illuminating a way forward. Islamic chaplaincy is a journey of embodying the highest values of faith, rooted in the example set by the Prophet Muhammad, who was sent as a mercy to all creation. By adopting the framework outlined in Qurʾān 33:45–46, the Muslim chaplain stands as a witness, bearer of good news, warner, and beacon of light who guides care seekers toward a deeper connection with their Creator. This role requires a deep commitment to *khidma*, *raḥma*, and the principles of centering God in all encounters, offering a path of compassion and wisdom that aligns with the Prophetic tradition.

As Muslim chaplains in America, our mission extends beyond providing care—it is about helping others fulfill their potential as caretakers of this earth, reflecting the divine attributes of mercy and love. In this, chaplains fulfill the purpose of *khalīfa*, nurturing ourselves and others on the path to worshiping and knowing God. Ultimately, Islamic chaplaincy is a means for both the chaplain and care seeker to achieve their highest purpose: to serve as vessels of divine light, guiding one another toward a more profound understanding of God and our role as caretakers in this world. May we continue to uphold this sacred tradition, striving to embody the values that Prophet Muhammad so beautifully exemplified, bringing us closer to the ultimate reality of Divine Oneness. Ameen.

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# Identity, Accountability, and Power in the American Muslim Community and in Islamic Chaplaincy

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## Abstract

*This paper uses a discursive framework to examine how identity, accountability, and power shape Islamic chaplaincy in North America. Drawing on the Amman Message and the works of Talal Asad, Wael Hallaq, Sherman Jackson, and Mariam Sheibani, the paper situates chaplaincy as both a site of spiritual care and religious formation. It argues that cultural difference, racial hierarchy, and institutional power are not peripheral but central to Muslim moral formation and professional ethics.*

***Keywords:*** *discursive tradition, accountability, authority, power, identity*

## Introduction

Muslim chaplains, the profession of chaplaincy in Muslim communities, and Muslim endorsing bodies play an important role in shaping Islam and Muslim identity in North America. A chaplain is often characterized as a trusted and competent person who "journeys with" or "walks beside" a care-seeker. Metaphors of traveling and journey pervade the Islamic tradition, in which believers seek to stay on "the straight path" (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), attempt to find the "way to the water" (*al-sharīʿa*), and perhaps follow an established spiritual "path" (*ṭarīqa*) for growth and community. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, advised believers to "be in this world like a traveler" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6416), but it was his custom to never travel alone.

Chaplains specialize in walking alongside people during times of crisis and transition. At varying times in their lives, individuals may struggle with adapting to difficult or exciting changes they face, such as becoming an independent adult, a good spouse, or a responsible parent. Over the course of one's life, new physical, psychological, spiritual, and social challenges emerge. These may be opportunities to grow, but they also may be overwhelming and confusing. Chaplains support both individuals and communities who want to heal past traumas, achieve greater balance in the present, and find a sense of purpose as they move through life and respond to changing circumstances.

When society is in a state of major upheaval, with political, environmental, and economic disruptions, communities may struggle to respond appropriately. Institutions and

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organizations vary in their capacities and willingness to shift priorities and adapt to emerging needs. A well-trained chaplain, one who is not overly regulated by a bureaucratic authority, should have the ability to respond effectively to dynamic situations and the needs of diverse care-seekers. At the same time, to ensure the care-seeker's safety, the chaplain must remain within the bounds of professional conduct and be accountable for his/her actions; this requires regulation and effective supervision.

Regarding Islamic chaplaincy through a discursive lens, this paper analyses how concepts of authority, accountability, and power are negotiated within Islamic theological traditions and contemporary institutional contexts, and situates chaplaincy as a site of religious meaning-making and a reflection of broader struggles over Muslim identity in North America. The key questions that this paper seeks to address are as follows:

- What kind of knowledge and which skills and capacities do American Muslim chaplains need to be effective, and to what extent does this vary based on the community they serve?
- What conscientious measures can individual chaplains, and the profession at large, take to responsibly nurture Islam in North America?
- How can Islamic chaplaincy endorsing agencies exercise the power to define Islam and regulate Muslim religious professionals in a responsible manner?

## The Religious Identity of a Muslim Chaplain

For many decades, chaplaincy training programs in the United States have shared a foundation in established principles of pastoral care to support both individuals and communities. Broad social changes in religious identities and sources of funding have created pressures on these programs, with some now putting less emphasis on community care and more emphasis on "spiritual care," "wellness," or therapeutic models of care. In these programs, the chaplain is held accountable primarily to principles and practices shared with other caring professions, and his/her religious identity becomes less significant to effective job performance according to institutional standards. While these programs and chaplaincy services help support many individual Muslims, many others expect to receive a model of care more explicitly religious and perhaps grounded in a distinctive Islamic theological identity or school of thought.

Professor of Social Work Wahiba Abu-Ras has studied the interaction between chaplains and Muslim patients in a state hospital system. She notes that in the United States in general, "chaplaincy services are typically designed and practiced according to a paradigm of pastoral care or 'spiritual care' for all, regardless of religious affiliation," and that "many of the non-Muslim chaplains and directors in our study argued that they are knowledgeable enough to care for all patients regardless of their faith." However, "many chaplain-researchers argue that there are limits to this model which, in effect, seems to be a Protestant-based chaplaincy model camouflaged as an interfaith model of CPT/chaplaincy…." (Abu-Ras 2011, 39). According to Abu-Ras, some of the limits these chaplains might face when offering care for Muslim patients include navigating end-of-life discussions, offering Islamic prayers and supplications, or engaging with resonant Islamic teachings when discussing difficult challenges. Muslim patients often request "content"

that a non-Muslim chaplain cannot offer. Further, many, probably most, Muslim patients do not recognize or at least do not prioritize an individual "spirituality" that is separate from the religious community.

Most of the knowledge and skills necessary to offer a straightforward, correct recitation of the Qurʾān (one which conforms to the well-established rules of *tajwīd*) and to offer an appropriate supplication (*duʿāʾ*) in Arabic or in English should be acquired during a chaplain's Islamic educational process. Beyond the basics, what requirements should there be in terms of a Muslim chaplain's knowledge of and/or adherence to a school of thought in law, theology, and spiritual practice? This is an especially pertinent issue when a chaplain's duties include supporting congregational or communal worship and religious learning.

On the institutional level, correctional systems and military services—among other government-controlled institutions with "captive" populations—are legally required to enable access to congregational services, which the chaplain typically leads or facilitates. Given that the diversity of the world's Muslims can be found among American Muslims, delineating Islam's outer boundaries and selecting particular modes of religious practice to adopt within those boundaries is not only a challenge, but also is bound to lead to dispute.

One notable contemporary effort to define Islam's outer limits can be found in the Amman Message, signed by Muslim scholars who were selected by the Jordanian hosts to represent different communities from across the world in 2005 (Winter 2018). Understanding how the document was created and the purposes it served can help inform our community in the choices we have to make when we define the identity, purposes, and development of Muslim chaplains (and other Muslim religious professionals). The first point of the Amman Message is an attempt to categorize all those identities or schools of thought, practice, or identity that must be accepted as "Muslim" and hence, cannot be the basis for declaring them apostates. It states:

> Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four *Sunni* schools (*Mathahib*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*), the two *Shi'i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Ja'fari* and *Zaydi*), the *'Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Thahiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are inviolable. Moreover, in accordance with the Shaykh Al-Azhar's *fatwa*, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to the *Ash'ari* creed or whoever practices real *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) an apostate. Likewise, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to true *Salafi* thought an apostate. Equally, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him) and the pillars of faith, and acknowledges the five pillars of

> Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of [the Islamic] religion.[1] (Amman Message 2004)

These statements invite further inquiry, especially for those who must decide for professional purposes who is to be identified as a Muslim and who is not. First, the inclusion of the Ẓāḥirī school might be puzzling to some since, even during the lifetime of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1054), its greatest proponent, it existed only as an intellectual school of thought, and not an active tradition of theology and jurisprudence. Second, who is it who wanted to distinguish "true" Salafi thought from the implied "untrue" Salafi thought—was it the Salafis among the group, or others? Third, similarly, if there is "real Sufism," then there must be a form of fake Sufism that must be identified, so what are its hallmarks? Last but not least, the final section of the statement offers a broad definition of a Muslim as one who believes in the *shahāda*, the pillars of faith and of Islam, and who "does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenets of religion (*maʿlūm min al-dīn bi-l-ḍarūra*)" (Amman Message 2004). The problem with this statement is that not all Muslim theologians agreed on which tenets of the religion are necessarily self-evident,[2] so what kind of inquiry could this condition invite? In addition to the question of who asked for the various distinctions to be made and the various groups included, perhaps the most significant question that might be raised is: Who is authorized to make all of these distinctions?

The Amman Message was initiated by King Abdullah II of Jordan in consultation with his own religious advisors, and then in consultation with a handful of senior international scholars. This occurred a few years after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which had created the conditions for large-scale sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites. During those years, there had also been what seemed to be an accelerating succession of terrorist attacks across the world justified in the name of Islam. The document that became the Amman Message sought to address the reckless declarations of apostasy and narrow definitions of Islam that were being used to justify violent attacks on other Muslims. Once the declaration was drafted, a large group of Muslim scholars (including myself) was invited to discuss, edit, and, finally, endorse the Amman Message. Thus, this declaration, like almost every other theological creed or statement written in Islamic history, was issued within the context of specific historical events and with a particular purpose; in this case, to cool the sectarian flames of violence. To point this out is not to critique the purpose of the document or its contents. Reducing vigilante and sectarian violence among Muslims is a valid goal, to say the least.

A valuable insight can be gained when we learn that after the Common Word conference ended, some Isma'ili Muslims pointed out they had been left out of the list of eight schools of jurisprudence. In a deft response to this awkward fact, the Agha Khan, who apparently had been invited to the conference but did not attend for unspecified

[1] This is the text on the English website of the Amman Message; I have retained their spelling and transliteration. The Arabic text is also available on the website.

[2] See Binyamin Abrahamov, "Necessary Knowledge in Islamic Theology," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 1 (1993): 20–32. For the discussion's broader context, see Oliver Leaman and Sajjad Rizvi, "The Developed *Kalām* Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 77–96.

reasons, wrote a letter to King Abdullah II in which he praises the conference, does not mention that the Isma'ilis have been left out of the Islamic schools explicitly identified as Muslim, but instead, offers a description of his community that allows it be implicitly included among those considered Muslim: "Our historic adherence is to the Jafari Madhhab and other Madhahib of close affinity, and it continues, under the leadership of the hereditary Isma'ili Imam of the time. This adherence is in harmony also with our acceptance of Sufi principles of personal search and balance between the zahir and the spirit or the intellect which the zahir signifies" (Aga Khan 2005). This letter was posted in a prominent place on the Amman Message website. It is unclear whether the Isma'ilis would have been included if the Agha Khan had attended the conference, yet as one of the scholars who attended the conference, I can affirm that those present were able to voice their concerns about who was or was not included and how they should be described.

We note that the Amman Message was not written to help endorsers or employers of Muslim chaplains draw distinctions among applicants. Nevertheless, it clearly demonstrates how debates over authority and inclusion, such as the definition of who speaks for Islam, is always a discursive journey over shifting historical, institutional, and ethical landscapes—including the emerging field of Islamic chaplaincy.

## The Role of Chaplains in Islamic Discourse

Talal Asad famously described Islam as a "discursive tradition" (Asad 2009). His statement was in response to characterizations (made by a diverse set of "observers" of Islam—mostly anthropologists) that Islam was either anything a Muslim claimed it was, or a fixed set of laws and doctrines—with anything outside of that set characterized as heterodox (i.e., not "orthodox") or "folk" Islam. Asad convincingly argued that it was only within the worldview of modern industrial societies that anyone would expect homogeneity in a tradition. In reality, Islam (and many other "traditions") is known and upheld by means of an ongoing discussion (discourse, lending to the term "discursive") among Muslims "that addresses itself to conceptions of the *Islamic* past and future, with reference to particular Islamic practice in the present" (Asad 2009, 20). This is not idle, purposeless talk. Asad states that, "although Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they *aspire to coherence* [my emphasis], in the way that all discursive traditions do" (Asad 2009, 23).

When Asad wrote about Islam as a discursive tradition, he was writing from a descriptive, rather than an explicitly religiously normative, perspective. Nevertheless, many Muslims would agree that he captured much of what Islamic tradition should be, viz., an open, purposeful, and coherent process of striving to understand and implement divine revelation and guidance. To have an *aspiration* is to have an intention, which is a pre-condition in most cases for any act to have spiritual merit, according to most Islamic schools of thought. To aim for *coherence* in thought is to attempt to exercise reasoning in a sound manner, with the confidence that Allah the Almighty endowed human beings with rationality for a purpose. Ibrahim Kalin, a Turkish scholar of Islamic thought, states:

> As God's intelligent work, the world of creation reflects His creative power. Given that God creates optimally and always for a purpose, the universe has an order and intelligibility built into it. Truth, when properly accessed, is the "disclosure" of this

> intrinsic order and intelligibility, which God as the Creator has bestowed upon existence. When reason investigates natural phenomena and the universe, it seeks out this order and intelligibility in them because without order, structure, and intelligibility we cannot know anything. To name something, without which we cannot perceive the world, means giving it a proper place and signification in the order of things. A non-subjectivist ontology of reason, which the Qur'an advocates, construes rationality as disclosing the principles of intelligibility derived from the intrinsic qualities of the order of existence. (Kalin 2012, 2–3)

When Allah the Almighty endowed human beings with the ability to reason, He gave us a precious and powerful gift, one that we can choose to use for beneficial or harmful purposes. To state that Islam is a discursive tradition, therefore, is not to say that "everything is relative" or "anything goes." Rather, this is a recognition that when Muslims strive to understand how best to implement Islamic principles, purposes, and values in changing circumstances, they must, at the same time, stay open, rather than be closed, to new information, perspectives, and insights from all of God's creation, including the diversity of the Children of Adam.

Wael Hallaq, in his study of Islamic legal scholarship and institutions, described this openness in the context of pre-modern Islamic legal reasoning as a "dialectical wheel," which he summarizes in the following manner:

> Society's legal disputes ended up before the courts of law; judges encountered hard cases which they took to the *muftī* for an expert opinion (though the *muftī* was queried by laypersons too); the *muftī* provided solutions to these hard cases, thereby preparing them for integration into the law works of his [jurisprudential] school; students usually copied, collected, edited, abridged, and finally published such *fatwās*; the author-jurist, the author of the school's authoritative *fiqh* work, incorporated most of these *fatwās* into his compendium; this he did while: (1) strictly maintaining the body of principles governing his school's legal corpus; (2) weeding out opinions that had fallen out of circulation; and, conversely, (3) retaining opinions that had newly arisen or those that continued to be relevant to legal practice. The product of this juristic activity was the *fiqh* work that continued to gauge and be gauged by legal practice. In sum, while legal practice was guided by *fiqh* discourse, the latter was shaped and modified by the former. Dialectically, one issued from, yet also fed, the other. (Hallaq 2009)

In this description of the dialectical wheel in a traditional Islamic legal system (which is similar to what some might call a "system" of thought),[3] Hallaq recognizes the input of those whom he calls "laypersons" when they bring their disputes to court and when they query *muftīs.* This is just one example of the many ways community members contribute to the Islamic discursive tradition.

[3] See, for example, Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008).

**The Profession's Engagement with Social Systems and Cultural Identities**

To state that Islam is a discursive tradition is to recognize that our understanding of any matter will be profoundly shaped by whom we include, and whom we exclude, from our discussions, organizations, and institutions. As more people are included in the discourse, when they previously were excluded due to elitism, classism, racism, sexism, and other systemic injustices, there will inevitably be shifts in understanding and practice. This is alarming to those who confuse conservatism with tradition. Conservatism (at least, one form of conservatism) is focused on past practice and insists that authenticity is to be found only in what has been validated previously. Those committed to a conservative view of Islam, therefore, might be opposed to new understandings and applications of sacred principles. In contrast, a discursive tradition can embrace new understandings and perspectives to inform methods and practice if an argument can be made that is coherent with revelation.

Kalin describes rationality in the Islamic tradition as "a function of existence and thinking and takes place *in a communicative and intersubjective context*" (my emphasis). He further explains:

> To say that something is intelligible means that it has a certain order and structure by which we can understand it. It also means that since it is intelligible, it can be communicated to others through language and rational arguments. This intersubjective context of rationality, which the Qur'an emphasizes on various occasions, places reason and rationality above the solitary work of a solipsistic and disengaged mind. Just as we humans are part of a larger reality, our thinking functions within a larger context of intelligibility. Using the plural form, the Qur'an explains its verses to a (tribe, nation, or community (*qawm*) who thinks) and chastises (those who do not use their reason) (see, for instance, Al-Baqarah, 2:164; Al-Maʾidah, 5:58; Al-Raʿd, 13:4; Al-Naḥl, 16:12). From disclosing the intrinsic intelligibility of things to intercultural relations, rationality emerges in a network of relations and connections that go beyond the internal procedures of the human mind. (Kalin 2012, 3)

It follows that reason and rationality in the Islamic tradition cannot be exercised in a sound manner if many of the humans who are "part of a larger reality" are excluded from the discourse. In the context of contemporary North American Muslim communities, this means that we have to take culture, cultural and "racial" identities, as well as structural barriers to inclusion, more seriously. Dr. Umar Abd-Allah has written about the need for American Muslims to pay closer attention to culture. He says:

> Culture weaves together the fabric of everything we value and need to know—beliefs, morality, expectations, skills, and knowledge—giving them functional expression by integrating them into effectual customary patterns. Culture is rooted in the world of expression, language, and symbol. But it relates also to the most routine facets of our activities—like dress and cooking—extends far beyond the mundane into religion, spirituality, and the deepest dimensions of our psyches… Family life and customs surrounding birth, marriage, and death immediately come

> to mind as obvious cultural elements, but so too are gender relations, social habits, skills for coping with life's circumstances, toleration and cooperation, or the lack of them, and even societal superstructures like political organization. (Abd-Allah 2004, 3)

If culture is the "functional expression" of our values and beliefs, it is not a stretch to say that it may be impossible for one Muslim chaplain to equally serve Muslims from all different ethnic, cultural, or socio-economic communities. While a well-trained Muslim chaplain should be able to offer a depth of care to all Muslims that non-Muslim chaplains are unable to offer, one cannot underestimate the extent to which the manifest differences among Muslims may impact this care. American Muslims reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the *umma*, as well as the diversity of the nation. The social and cultural practices through which American Muslims express their Islamic values and find resilience vary widely and cannot always be reconciled. Our community includes, for example, recent immigrants who, while they have physically left their extended families and homelands behind, nevertheless remain deeply attached to and have legal and ethical obligations to many people back home.[4] Our community also includes those whose ancestors are indigenous to the land, whose experience of American genocide is seldom acknowledged, and who might prioritize restoring the health of their families and communities on their traditional lands. Our community further includes those whose enslaved African ancestors experienced oppression and traumatic violence for hundreds of years, whose parents and grandparents, in their struggle for civic and human rights, set a model for all other Americans, and yet who still face personalized and systemic anti-Black prejudice and discrimination. And our community also includes Muslims who have no family or cultural community upon whom they can rely because they have been made isolated, impoverished, and demeaned by the harsh reality of American capitalism and individualism.

Should the specific experiences and identities of diverse communities within the broader American Muslim community matter when endorsers, directors, and educators prioritize the competencies, qualifications, and identities of Muslim chaplains and other religious professionals in our institutions and programs? That question will be answered differently, depending upon who is empowered to set the priorities for the group. The reality is that many well-intentioned Muslim religious professionals harm others because they have failed to acquire the knowledge necessary to understand the context (the "larger reality," in Kalin's words) in which they operate. Too many American Muslims, for example, are not only ignorant, but willfully ignorant, of the reality of anti-Black racism. Just as implicit Islamophobic bias can prevent a non-Muslim chaplain from responsibly caring for a Muslim care-seeker, color-privilege and race-privilege can also be significant obstacles for some Muslims to offer responsible care to other Muslims.

[4] New Americans often truly live "here" and "back home" and are financially responsible for more than one family member abroad. This can lead to disagreements among Muslim community members about how to prioritize zakat and charity distribution, which is a tangible and symbolic signifier of compassion and community. For a deeper analysis of this, see, Ingrid Mattson, "Zakat in America: The Evolving Role of Charity in Community Cohesion," published by the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2010.

While it is unlikely that any Muslim chaplains would admit (even to themselves) to holding racist views, the denial of white privilege by a white or white-passing care-giver can cause harm to care-seekers.[5] But cultural competency and equity training is not enough. Even if white Muslim chaplains have worked to understand and apply anti-racist principles in their work, they still might not be connected to the cultural "content" (in Abu-Ras's terminology) of an African American Islamic tradition that is critical to the health and resilience of many members of this community. Although a necessary floor, anti-discrimination measures do not constitute the horizon of responsible chaplaincy. As we have argued, a foundational component upon which responsible chaplaincy can be built is a willingness for chaplaincy to participate in Islam's discursive tradition, wherein accountability is expanded beyond individual conduct to include attention to who is invited into the conversation, which knowledges are authorized, and how power is constrained when chaplains represent Islam in institutional settings.

We can turn to the work of Dr. Sherman Jackson for guidance on the development of discursive competence in the profession of chaplaincy. Dr. Jackson has spent decades reflecting upon how Muslims categorize what is, and what is not, "Islamic," and how this discourse affects the vitality and coherence of our communities. In his recent book, he argues that the term "Islamic secular" could be used to identify issues, spheres of life, and processes that do not strictly fall within the jurisdiction of *sharīʿa*, but are nevertheless vital to the "plausibility" of Islam and health of Muslim communities (Jackson 2024). While others might argue for alternative characterizations of these spaces and concerns (such as the "context"), Jackson's argument is compelling and, in the context of pervasive anti-Black racism, carries with it an urgency that should not be ignored:

> Even if institutionalized racism does not force Muslims to violate any specific *ḥukm sharʿī,* in that they can still pray, fast, wear *ḥijāb*, marry, inherit, build mosques, avoid alcohol, and eschew *ribā*, it may still undermine Islam and Muslims. Yet, how racial subjugation saps Muslims' self-confidence and resolve, how it breeds complexes that predispose them to self-doubt and self-hatred or to preferring the ways of the "superior" group over Islam, how it facilitates the voluntary forfeiture of economic rights and resources, how it impedes the acquisition of the cultural and intellectual authority necessary to the health and longevity of Islam's requisite *nomos* and plausibility structure, how it demoralizes Muslims and in turn potentially renders truth—about themselves as well as the Other—subservient to "victory," in fact, how it inhibits the dominant group's ability to give Islam a fair hearing, as Islam is invariably viewed as the Faith of "inferiors"—all of this, as well as what to do about it, is apprehended primarily not through the hermeneutics of *fiqh/sharīʿah* contemplating scripture, but by Islamic Secular *ʿaqlī* energies contemplating and interacting with socio-political reality. Even if *fiqh/sharīʿah* should address these issues so understood, the most it could provide would be a

[5] See the Muslim Anti-Racism Collective's "Anti-racism Guide for White Muslims" at https://muslimlink.ca/pdf/Anti-RacismGuide-Digital.pdf.

> *ḥukm sharʿī,* that condemns racism as ḥarām, or "impermissible," which is different from telling Muslims what, if anything, to do about it. (Jackson 2024, 348)

Jackson argues that many matters essential to Islam's "plausibility," the conditions rendering Islam livable, believable, and intellectually and morally coherent in a given time and place, such as race, power, institutional harms, sit outside *fiqh*'s narrow remit while at the same time constitute **decisively Islamic** concerns. As such, his framing of the *Islamic secular* invites chaplaincy educators and practitioners to adopt a discursive posture, where the work of confronting systemic injustice is not peripheral, but integral to the moral labor of Islamic chaplaincy.

## The Responsible Exercise of Power: Endorsement as Discourse

Jackson's work sheds light upon one of the most difficult challenges for North American Muslims: how to responsibly use the power of making religious endorsements for Muslim chaplains on behalf of the state. Here, identities must be defined, practices regulated, and policies established if we are to make endorsements. Jackson's scholarship requires a depth of knowledge and measure of attention that many Muslims might say they do not have or are unable to give. But each one of us is capable of taking a few minutes to reflect on this question: Why is it that Jackson, a preeminent contemporary scholar of Islamic law and theological ethics, has now written three substantial books[6] engaging with the theme of anti-Black racism as he theorizes the boundaries of Islamic law and theology? Why has he, after writing hundreds of pages plumbing the depths of Islamic legal theory and history, had to argue the point that it is an "Islamic" act for Muslims to engage with social scientific scholarship about racism, its manifestations, enablers, and impacts? This is not to reduce his vast and expansive scholarship in these monographs to a single issue or to limit his purposes, for there are legions of lessons to be learned from his publications. What I am suggesting is that there is a persistent resistance of a particular type that Jackson has repeatedly had to push against, and that chaplaincy is not immune to this resistance. This resistance appears in the refusal to consider issues or concerns that are not explicitly regulated by "Islamic law" (*fiqh* or *sharīʿa*) to be moral priorities; sometimes such concerns are even characterized as foreign intrusions into the "Islamic tradition." Jackson is not alone in facing this resistance, nor is anti-Black racism the only major issue that has not been given the priority it deserves by Muslim communities and their leaders. Replace "racial subjugation" with "misogyny" in his passage above and the negative dynamics he describes still hold.

In a recent article, Dr. Mariam Sheibani argues that (Islamic) "legalism"—that is, equating what is "Islamic" with Islamic law—has enabled abusive practices, such as Muslim scholars justifying secret marriages with their students and *murīd*s by rejecting any normative or practical knowledge outside the law. She points out that the law (*fiqh*) does

[6] The other two are: *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

not take Muslims far in developing and cultivating moral and healthy family relationships. For example, "The answer to most marital tensions does not usually lie in more knowledge and the application of the law, but in taking moral responsibility and accountability for ourselves and searching for creative solutions to resolve tensions arising in our relationship inspired by the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad" (Sheibani 2023, 13). Further,

> As a body of rules, *fiqh* is not intended to instruct us on how to be good spouses or good children, especially when we hedge as close as possible to minimum absolute obligations and duties and nothing more. For example, if we turn to another relationship that *fiqh* minimally regulates, that between adult children and parents, we will gain very little insight into how to honor parents from *fiqh* alone. *Fiqh* delineates the minimum obligations of financial maintenance that a child must fulfill in order to avoid liability before a judge in court for neglect of their duty of care.

Both Jackson and Sheibani argue, in their own ways, against the refusal to consider what is "Islamic" in the regulation and organization of Muslim societies and communities beyond what is regulated by Islamic law. We suggest that, similar to the way "spiritual bypassing"[7] may block the honest examination of a person's dysfunctional mental state and circumstances, Islamic "legalism" can block an honest examination of abusive and oppressive systems and practices in a Muslim community. Talal Asad would see this refusal as an assertion of power: "Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy" (Asad 2009, 22).

With power, some can claim orthodoxy as the reason for refusing to engage with an issue, deeming it unimportant or contrary to what is "Islamic," and by so doing, they use their power to paralyze the dynamic movement of the discursive Islamic tradition. This is a choice that Muslims in a society where they have religious freedom are free to make. How such choices will be judged by Allah the Almighty, however, is another matter altogether. This should give us pause and cause us to engage more seriously than we have up to now with the issue of power.

Chaplaincy is integral to Islam in North America because it is a path where questions of religious identity, authority, and accountability converge and through which our communities are thoughtfully engaging with these issues. Because of our community's diversity, there is already more than one chaplain-endorsing organization for American Muslims. We should embrace this development as positive, because it means that we remain self-governing and refuse the state the right to interpret our faith for us. Nevertheless, it would be wise for a Muslim endorsing body that aims to have a broader

[7] The term "spiritual bypassing" is used by counselors to indicate a spiritual or religious coping style "whereby spiritual beliefs, emotions, or experiences are used to avoid or bypass one's difficulties." See Salman Shaheen Ahmad, Merranda Marie McLaughlin, and Amy Weisman de Mamani, "Spiritual Bypass as a Moderator of the Relationships Between Religious Coping and Psychological Distress in Muslims Living in the United States," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 15, no. 1 (2023), 32-42, p. 33, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000469.

positive influence on American Islamic culture to embrace an open and discursive approach to the Islamic tradition, rather than retreat to a narrow assertion of orthodoxy that prevents the assimilation of new information and perspectives.

## Conclusion

Like all Islamic organizations in North America, chaplain education, professional organizations, endorsing bodies, and employers are regulated to some extent by multiple state entities. In the words of Mohammad Fadel, when it comes to how we interpret and apply revelation and place people in positions of institutional power and religious authority, we are a "self-governing community" (Fadel, n.d.). Muslims in North America have struggled and continue to fight for this right to interpret and practice our faith as we understand it. One could argue that many of us still have not taken seriously enough the responsibilities that entail with the right to self-governance. As I described in detail in a recently published paper (Mattson 2024), from the time the first generation of Muslims won the right of self-governance, they paid close attention to the regulation of power. Some of the findings of this research include:

- those who hold public positions, including religious professionals, must be supervised and held accountable by someone with more power or greater authority than themselves.
- those with great influence over the religious community are held to higher standards than other people.
- good people may be excluded from leadership and professional associations if they lack competence.
- public leaders and religious professionals may be subject to additional restrictions on otherwise lawful behavior for the public good (*maṣlaḥa*).
- abuses of power and violations of trust are offenses that may be disclosed, rather than concealed, in contrast to personal mistakes or sin.
- a person may be suspended from a position once a serious complaint is made and before an investigation is completed.
- governing authorities must operationalize principles of justice through effective regulations (*al-siyāsa al-sharīʿa*) that will vary across communities because they must take into account existing beneficial cultural practices and customs.

These are a few general Islamic administrative principles and practices that should be applied to Muslim chaplaincy, and indeed to all Muslim organizations and Islamic institutions. What will remain diverse is the way Muslims interpret and apply revelation, identify and implement Islamic principles, and prioritize issues of concern. Uniformity of policy and practice among North American Muslims can only come about through coercion and state enforcement. We should, of course, vigorously resist transferring the power to live according to our conscience and our faith as we understand it to the state, even if we

sometimes feel strongly that our interpretation is the right one.[8] The work of chaplaincy is not simply to meet institutional standards of care, but attending to the moral environment that renders Islam livable in diverse contexts, thereby animating the living discourse of Islam. *Wa Allāhu aʿlam* (And Allah knows better).

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[8] Some American Muslim scholars have, for example, seemed to encourage the state to severely limit abortion rights while others have argued that this is a violation of the religious freedom of Muslims who hold a range of opinions on this issue. See Asifa Quraishi-Landes, "Abortion bans trample on the religious freedom of Muslims, too," in the *San Francisco Chronicle,* June 24, 2022; https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/abortion-bans-religion-17259119.php.

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# Change from Within: A Model for Training Imams and Muslim Chaplains About Domestic Violence

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**Abstract**

*Within the American Muslim community, faith leaders are often first responders to domestic violence (Abugideiri 2007; Mogahed and Chouhoud 2017). In this role, they can influence an individual's help-seeking choices and life outcomes (Abugideiri 2007; Alkhateeb, Ellis, and Fortune 2001; Khan 2006; Oyewuwo-Gassikia 2019). However, uninformed responses, including furthering denial, minimization and stigmatization of abuse, and the misuse of religious texts contribute to a survivor's re-victimization and reduced likelihood of him/her reaching out for support again.*

*Faith-based interventions presented as a choice between faith and safety can create spiritual dilemmas. The Peaceful Families Project (PFP), a 20-year-old national non-profit organization, offers a culturally sensitive, multi-disciplinary training model that expels myths about domestic violence, creates awareness about its prevalence and impact, and equips imams and Muslim chaplains to respond more appropriately and effectively to abuse. PFP's unique model employs peer to peer education and is grounded in foundational Islamic texts, beliefs, and regulations.*

*Evaluation data from 28 religious leaders and chaplains across three timepoints (pre, post-, 6-month follow-up) of domestic violence prevention training reveal that, on average, participants' knowledge of domestic violence, confidence to respond, and preparation for action improved post-training. Improvements in knowledge and preparation to act were retained at follow-up but slightly declined for confidence to respond, which suggests the need for continual training and support for religious leaders. Findings suggest this training is an effective tool for increasing knowledge, confidence, and action in religious leaders in their role as first responders to domestic violence in their communities.*

***Keywords:*** *domestic violence, prevention, training, religious leaders, chaplain*

## Background

The Peaceful Families Project (PFP) was founded by Sharifa Alkhateeb in 2000. While other ethnic organizations provide direct services to Muslims, PFP was the first Muslim-specific national organization focused solely on domestic violence prevention (Abugideiri and Alkhateeb 2007; Abugideiri 2010). Alkhateeb was motivated to address this critical need noted by her and colleagues nationwide who were working with Muslim families impacted by domestic violence who received little or no survivor-centered, best practices-informed assistance when approaching religious leaders for support.

This concern was confirmed by the first known national survey of Muslim leaders, which indicated that at least 10% of the leaders themselves had experienced domestic violence (Alkhateeb 1999). A landmark national study conducted by PFP and Project Sakinah (Celik and Sabri 2011) of 801 American Muslims found that 53% of respondents reported having experienced some form of domestic violence, and 31% reported experiencing intimate partner violence. When asked if they knew anyone who had experienced it, even if not themselves, 66% reported that they did. These findings demonstrate a significant need for support and resources in the American Muslim community (hereinafter "community").

The community is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, sect, languages, immigration status, and more. Therefore, one must utilize an intersectionality approach in any understanding of, and allyship to, survivors (Mokhtar and Chaudhry 2022). Due to racism, sexism, and Islamophobia perpetuating stereotypes of marginalized communities as violent, survivors may hesitate to disclose abuse for fear of confirming these stereotypes to mainstream services and systems, which may cause them to delay seeking help until the situation becomes untenable (Al-Ali 2019; Ghabra 2018; Oyewuwo-Gassikia 2016). These factors also encourage utilizing faith and culturally specific services to protect the community from further negative scrutiny. These cultural and societal factors, in conjunction with a lack of knowledge on the part of leaders and community members, can lead to re-victimizing survivors by blaming them for the violence. All of these factors contribute to maintaining the conspiracy of silence around this reality (Douki et al. 2003).

The murder of Asiya Zubair in 2009, featured in national headlines like "Upstate New York Man Charged with Beheading His Estranged Wife" (Robbins 2009), shocked the nation's Muslim communities into action. The community could no longer ignore that it was not immune to domestic violence and that nationally known and supported public figures could be guilty of such heinous crimes. When it emerged that the perpetrator had a history of domestic violence in previous marriages as well, community leaders began to realize the role they play in potentially being complicit by not supporting survivors or acting when becoming aware of the violence. This tragedy forced communities nationwide to confront their lack of preparedness and the need for trained leadership, leading to an increased demand for training imams and community leaders.

People of faith who wish to act in accordance with their religious beliefs often turn to their faith leaders for guidance and help in understanding what is happening to them

(Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk 2005). Research suggests that imams play a critical role in counseling community members experiencing family conflict (Abu Ras, Gheith, and Cournos 2008; Ali 2016; Fawzy 2019). In such cases, religious leaders are often the first line of support. In addition, community members may face barriers to seeking mainstream or secular services, including linguistic and cultural obstacles, a lack of cultural humility on the part of mainstream service providers, and discrimination or Islamophobia (Ghafournia and Easteal 2021; Milani, Leschied and Rodger 2018). As faith leaders have the increased benefit of religious understanding, trust, and are often members of the same cultural group, they may offer linguistically and culturally appropriate services.

Religious leaders have a significant impact on determining how people understand abuse, as well as a survivor's help-seeking choices (Abugideiri 2007; Alkhateeb, Ellis, and Fortune 2001; Khan 2006; Oyewuwo-Gassikia 2019). Unfortunately, most clergy have no formal training in counseling in general (Abu-Ras, Gheith, and Cournos 2008; Drumm et al. 2018; Fawzy 2019) and are inadequately trained to handle domestic violence cases specifically (Abugideiri 2007; Alkhateeb, Ellis, and Fortune 2001; Fawzy 2019; Mogahed and Chouhoud 2017). As a result, not all religious leaders have a positive impact on survivors.

Religious leaders have the potential to use validation, empathy, and religious values to support survivors in their journey toward safety and healing. On the other hand, they may misuse and/or misinterpret religious values such as patience, forgiveness, and prioritizing the sanctity of marriage, encouraging an individual to stay in an abusive relationship (Abugideiri 2012; Abugideiri and Magid 2013; Alkhateeb, Ellis, and Fortune 2001; Alwani 2007; Fortune, Dratch, and Abugideiri 2010; Nason-Clark 2000; Sweifach and Heft-LaPorte 2007). Many survivors may struggle to reconcile Islamic teachings that call for justice (such as Qurʾān 4:135 and 16:90) and that describe the marital relationship as one grounded in mercy, love, and compassion (such as Qurʾān 30:21), for some leaders suggest that women should accept being physically, emotionally, or sexually abused by the very person who, according to the Islamic marriage contract, is supposed to take care of them (Alkhateeb 2012; Alwani 2007; Fortune, Dratch, and Abugideiri 2010). Such responses from imams leave many individuals feeling betrayed and confused, not to mention facing increased danger at home.

When discussing the religious leader's impact, one must name the power dynamics inherent in the help-seeking relationship and recognize the potential for harm emanating from exerting spiritual authority. The National Domestic Violence Hotline defines spiritual abuse as a "faith leader inflicting abuse on congregation members, often by creating a toxic culture within the institution or community by shaming or controlling members through the power of their position in the society." This may include misusing religious texts and beliefs to "minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors" (Hotline, 2021). As a result, people in abusive relationships may feel they have to choose between their faith and their safety (Abugideiri 2012; Fortune 2001). This may lead to distancing themselves from their faith, which can further isolate them from support systems and connectedness, both of which are building blocks of resilience (Hassouneh-Phillips 2003; Magid 2007).

Given their variable impact on survivors, training religious leaders is a powerful point of intervention to build upon the faith communities' potential strengths and benefits

and to minimize the potential harm they may cause. Previous studies have shown the benefits of such training (Drumm et al. 2018; Fowler et al. 2006; Snow et al. 2006). In this paper, we will describe one integrative model for American Muslim religious leaders that utilizes both Islamic foundations and counseling skills to improve the effectiveness of help-provision. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be utilized to explore its efficacy.

## Methods

### *Procedure*

Between 2000 and 2009, the Peaceful Families Program (PFP) developed an Imam and Chaplain Training Program through a series of local and national workshops. The core training of this annual workshop's two-day national training session is co-led by two content experts who cover a comprehensive range of informational topics and skill building related to addressing patterns of abuse in Muslim homes. The training team consists of a domestic violence and mental health expert (female) and an imam (male) with expertise in religious doctrine and domestic violence. The team's composition has become a signature part of PFP's professional development programming for imams, modeling collaboration on multiple levels. Participants experience the collaboration of female and male, practitioner and imam, secular trained and religiously trained individuals working and teaching as equal partners.

Additional speakers are frequently invited to enhance the workshops, including local religious leaders to build local credibility, family law attorneys, domestic violence service providers, and other related experts. In addition, participants have the opportunity to overcome potential biases, experience the value of collaborating with these professionals and providers, and to begin building relationships with them. The training program has historically taken place in-person. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was adapted to a virtual format in 2020.

Participants are recruited nationwide using personal, professional and community networks, and, in more recent years, social media. The lead trainer interviews registered participants to determine their level of experience, training, and exposure to domestic violence. Each religious leader is asked why he/she wishes to attend and what he/she hopes to gain. These answers then shape the design of the curriculum components.

#### Assumptions

The PFP's training model is based on several key assumptions: (a) Islamic teachings provide a model for preventing and intervening in domestic violence; (b) cultural humility (Waters and Asbill 2013) facilitates the learning process; (c) compassion is a necessary and effective change agent; and (d) the core belief that religious leaders would avoid harm if they were aware and will make necessary changes once they are equipped with the required knowledge, tools, and resources.

**Islam as a preventive model.** The PFP's approach acknowledges that historical context and cultural values grounded in patriarchy have shaped the interpretation and application of Islamic teachings related to gender, marriage, and domestic violence.

Specific values, such as those that promote male superiority and encourage female submissiveness, conflated with Islamic teachings contribute to domestic violence being justified via Islamic teachings. A central assumption in the PFP's approach is that Islamic teachings provide a preventive model that promotes peaceful, loving, and respectful relationships, especially between spouses (Alwani and Abugideiri 2003).

The objectives of Islamic law (*maqāsid al-sharīʿa*) provide a framework that emphasizes preserving life and human dignity (Abugideiri and Magid 2013; Alwani 2007). The PFP provides education about domestic violence prevention as grounded within that tradition, and its approach lifts up those Islamic teachings that promote justice, gender equity, and peaceful relationships, as well as those that clearly prohibit any form of domestic violence (Alkhateeb 1999; Alkhateeb and Abugideiri 2007; Alwani and Abugideiri 2003; Khan 2006).

**Cultural humility.** Cultural humility is: (a) a constant practice of self-awareness and self-reflection of one's own intersecting social identities; (b) when working with communities, an ongoing analysis of how one's identities contribute to power imbalances in interactions with community members; and (c) acting to address imbalances to provide more effective and just services (Danso 2018). Several elements are embedded in the trainers' approach in engaging with participants, among them the important role of imams and chaplains and the positive and negative power of their words and actions. The training environment is an opportunity for religious leaders to build collaborative relationships and partnerships.

One must understand the culture of being an imam and/or a chaplain, which includes being in a position of authority and leadership, as well as being the person on whom community members rely for guidance in personal matters. We believe that religious leaders learn best when they can step out of their role and feel seen and understood. The peer-to-peer model allows them to set down their role and feel connected. Participants are also better able to accept materials when a religious expert, grounded in Islamic law and practice, facilitates the training. Each training session must strive to cultivate relationships that lead to collaboration and coordination to end domestic violence.

**Compassion.** For transformation to occur, both participants and trainers must feel welcomed, valued, and respected. The participants' important contributions to their communities need to be recognized. Therefore, the PFP's approach is grounded in compassion, which builds on an assumption that most faith leaders believe in doing no harm; however, they may inadvertently support abuse due to their lack of knowledge and training. While holding them accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities, one must have compassion for these leaders who are expected to perform many community functions without adequate support and training.

Compassion and respect facilitate the building of rapport between both groups by reducing defensiveness, which then improves the participants' ability to learn. As religious leaders engage with the training material, one expects participants to develop deeper levels of compassion and empathy for the abused, thereby authentically extending compassion toward them. In this way, survivors remain the priority of all training activities. Engaging with these leaders compassionately is in no way intended to collude with those who have misused or abused their power or absolve them from accountability.

In many cases, participants share their own experiences of trauma and abuse. They need a safe and compassionate space in which they can be vulnerable. This depends heavily upon combining the facilitators' respective areas of expertise; the trainer with a mental health background offers clinical skills in trauma-informed group facilitation and the trainer with religious knowledge offers faith-based and spiritual interventions.

Goals

The overarching goals of the PFP's training program for religious leaders are to (1) recognize cases of domestic violence and understand key aspects of the relevant literature; (2) increase the participant's effectiveness in responding in the most appropriate and safest manner; and (3) encourage religious leaders to use their unique role to engage in prevention efforts.

Structural Components

The training curriculum included (a) providing information; (b) building empathy; (c) overviewing relevant Islamic law; (d) discussing the role of the imam; and (e) building skills. Details of the curriculum topics are outlined in Appendix A.

### *Participants*

This outcome evaluation outlines data from two cohorts of participants who attended the PFP's National Training of Religious Leaders. Sixteen participants in 2018 completed the study surveys; while twelve participants in 2019 completed them. Demographic data was collected to understand the nature of the present sample. Taken together, participants ranged from 20 to 72 years old (M = 46.17 years), with twenty-four identifying as male and four as female. The sample was diverse with regard to ethnicity and both secular and religious education. Eleven (39.3%) stated they had some level of counseling training. When asked to select from a list of types of training about domestic violence they had completed prior to the National Imam & Chaplain Training, six participants across the two cohorts (21.4%) said that they had had no previous training. Of the remainder, most had attended one (five participants) or two (eight participants) types of training. The majority had attended a lecture or talk on the topic (sixteen participants), watched a video (eleven participants), and/or attended a skills-based training on domestic violence (nine participants).

### *Measures*

To assess the program's effectiveness, we adapted the PREMIS (Physician Readiness to Manage Intimate Partner Violence Survey; Short et al. 2006) for a religious leader cohort. We shortened the survey's length to fit this sample's needs and modified language to reflect discipline-specific terminology and cultural sensitivity. Online pre-test, post-test, and follow-up surveys were administered using SurveyMonkey to assess (a) confidence in one's ability to manage DV cases; (b) preparation to act when confronted with a DV case; (c) knowledge about DV; (d) actual actions taken when confronted with DV cases in the past; and (e) actual referrals they made when working with DV cases in the past.

We also assessed their environmental context, including relationship with the board, resources/support for their work, and the impact of Ramadan on their work with congregants. Finally, participants answered questions about their experience of the training program, including (a) the degree to which the workshop met their expectations and its objectives; (b) how well the concepts were presented; and (c) how confident they felt about addressing domestic violence. They were also asked to identify what they found most helpful, what was missing, what was offensive or unhelpful, the key message(s) they were taking away, and how they would utilize what they had learned. During the concluding session, we obtained both written evaluations and verbal feedback.

The survey was administered at three time points: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. The research team emailed pre-test surveys to participants a few days before the training's beginning; responses could not be submitted after the training began. The post-test, emailed at the end of the training, was closed a few days after the training concluded. Follow-up surveys were emailed approximately 10–12 weeks after the training. Participants received multiple reminders to complete the survey to ensure that they had enough time to do so. The follow-up survey was closed approximately 15 weeks after the training.

During the closing session, we obtained both written evaluations and verbal feedback. The evaluation forms asked participants to rate the degree to which the workshop met their expectations and its objectives, how well they were presented, and how confident they felt about addressing domestic violence. They were also asked to indicate what they found most helpful, what was missing, what was offensive or unhelpful, the key message(s) they were taking away, and how they would utilize what they had learned.

## Results

### *Efficacy of the Imam and Chaplain Training*

Two participants began the survey but completed only the demographic questions. Twenty-six completed the pre-test, sixteen completed the post-test, and seven (all from the 2018 cohort) completed the follow-up survey. The data presented below represents the entire sample. Data for the seven participants who completed the survey over all three timepoints is presented in parentheses so the reader can acquire a fuller picture of the trends identified.

Respondents were asked "How much do you feel you know about…," followed by a list of prompts such as reasons for disclosure, what to say in response to a disclosure, how to assess risk, signs of abuse, referral sources for survivors, and legal reporting requirements. Response options ranged from "nothing" (0) to "very much" (6). At pre-test, the mean score indicated that respondents endorsed being somewhere between "a little" (2) and "a moderate amount" (3). At post-test, the average score improved to between "a fair amount" (4) to "quite a bit" (5), and participants retained some improved confidence at follow-up.

| **Table 1: Confidence score average (possible r = 0–6)** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pre-test**<br>N = 26<br>(N = 7) | **Post-test**<br>N = 16<br>(N = 7) | **Follow-up**<br>N = 7 |
| Disclosure | 3.462 (3.14) | 5 (4.86) | 3.57 |
| What to say | 2.615 (2.14) | 4.625 (4.57) | 3.43 |
| Determine danger | 2.615 (2.42) | 4.938 (5.0) | 3.57 |
| Signs/Symptoms | 2.731 (2.71) | 4.938 (4.72) | 4 |
| Referral Sources | 2.269 (2.0) | 5.0 (5.0) | 3.57 |
| Reporting requirements | 2.346 (2.71) | 4.563 (4.43) | 4.14 |

Respondents were asked how prepared they felt to perform certain actions when confronted with domestic violence. Response options ranged from "not prepared" (0) to "quite well prepared" (6). Participants reported being between "slightly prepared" (2) and "moderately prepared" (3) with regard to how to respond appropriately to disclosures of abuse, make appropriate referrals, and fulfill the legal requirements to report abuse. Their perceived preparation to act markedly improved at post-test (between "fairly well prepared" [4] and "well prepared" [5]) and retained some perceived preparation at follow-up.

| **Table 2: Preparation to act (possible r = 0–6)** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Pre-test**<br>N = 26<br>(N = 7) | **Post-test**<br>N = 16<br>(N = 7) | **Follow-up**<br>N = 7 |
| Appropriately respond to disclosures of abuse | 2.385<br>(2.57) | 4.688<br>(4.57) | 3.43 |
| Make appropriate referrals | 2.440<br>(2.71) | 4.625<br>(4.57) | 3.71 |
| Fulfill legal reporting requirements for abuse | 2.385<br>(2.57) | 4.438<br>(4.29) | 3.43 |

Respondents were then asked to assess their knowledge of domestic violence (e.g., risk factors for violence, signs that someone is being abused). These knowledge questions were scored so that correct answers were equal to "1" and all other answers were equal to "0," and then summed to create a total score. The actions item asked respondents to identify which action, chosen from a list of actions, they took with clients in the past six months. The score was calculated as a sum. Referrals were assessed by a question that asked respondents to select from a list which referrals they had made in that particular time frame. The score was calculated as a sum.

**Table 3: Knowledge (r = 0–16), Actual actions (r = 0–6), Actual referrals (0–17)**

| | **Pre-test**<br>N = 26 (range)<br>N = 7 (range) | **Post-test**<br>N = 16 (range)<br>N = 7 (range) | **Follow-up**<br>N = 7 (range) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge Score | 9.231 (2–15)<br>8.57 (3–13) | 10.813 (5–14)<br>11.14 (5–13) | 11.71 (5–16) |
| Actions Score | 2.154 (0–6)<br>2.14 (0–5) | – | 2.33 (1–6) |
| Referrals Score | 2.654 (0–14)<br>3.14 (0–14) | – | 3.67 (1–12) |

Respondents were asked which actions they took with the DV clients they have worked with in the past six months. The number of respondents that indicated they "[c]ounseled client on options" increased substantially in the follow-up survey as compared to the pre-test. Other actions (e.g., Provided information to client, Helped person develop safety plan) decreased substantially.

**Table 4: Actions sum items**

| | **Pre-test**<br>N = 26 (N = 7) | **Follow-up**<br>N = 7 |
|---|---|---|
| Provided information to client | 46.14% (57.14%) | 28.57% |
| Counseled client on options | 53.85% (57.14%) | 71.43% |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Safety assessment - victim | 34.62% (28.57%) | 28.57% |
| Safety assessment - children | 30.77% (28.57%) | 28.57% |
| Helped person develop safety plan | 34.62% (28.57%) | 14.29% |
| Other action | 15.38% (14.29%) | 28.57% |

Respondents were then asked how often they had taken the following actions when working with a client in the past six months. The responses range from "never" (0) to "nearly always" (5). The mean responses increased for all actions except "Offered validating/supportive statements," which remained steady.

**Table 5: Additional actions**

| | **Pre-test**<br>N = 15<br>(N = 7) | **Follow-up**<br>N = 7 |
|---|---|---|
| When mandated, made a report | 2.154 (1) | 1.5 |
| Contacted a DV service provider | 1.8 (1.25) | 2.5 |
| Offered validating/supportive statements | 2.6 (3.6) | 3.6 |
| Provided referral and/or other info | 2.875 (3) | 3.6 |

### *Field Notes and Program Reflections*

Qualitative analysis of field notes and reflections by the program trainers yielded important lessons about working with this population of imams and chaplains. The majority of participants were excited to gain tools that would supplement their Islamic knowledge in order to respond to domestic violence more appropriately and effectively. They shared their unpreparedness for the cases they were asked to address, acknowledging that their training did not teach them to deal with domestic violence. A recurring statement was, "I know the *fiqh* (jurisprudence), but I don't have the tools and skills." Many of the religious leaders expressed surprise at what they learned by having a female trainer to better help them understand the experience of female survivors.

One imam objected to having a female trainer on the grounds that it was inappropriate for the men to watch her and other female presenters; however, he decided

to attend the program anyway. By the end of the training, while this opinion persisted, he also acknowledged that he had benefited.

The attending religious leaders reported that they were highly motivated to learn how to apply their Islamic knowledge in counseling situations. They expressed a wide range of opinions regarding domestic violence as a function of education, culture, ethnicity, race, historical events, and personal histories. Personal exposure to violence often entailed being abused as children by parents or religious teachers, being bullied, and abuse in their marriages. Trainers noted that participants valued being learners as peers; discarding their role as "expert"; being vulnerable; and getting support from peers, trainers, and PFP as an organization. The group learning format style encouraged participants to hold each other accountable and use positive peer pressure to move each other in the right direction when a particular participant resisted what was being taught.

## Discussion

The current study offers a preliminary analysis of the efficacy of a domestic violence training program for imams and Muslim chaplains. The findings demonstrated that both groups often receive minimal to no information or training related to domestic violence and no counseling skills. Thus, Muslim religious leaders may lack understanding, confidence in their knowledge, and the skills to manage these cases as they arise. Findings reveal that after a two-day domestic violence training program, participants showed an increase in their knowledge of this issue. Notably, there was a substantial rise in their self-reported confidence in their knowledge (e.g., reasons for disclosure, what to say in response to a disclosure, how to assess risk, signs of abuse, referral sources for survivors, and legal reporting requirements). However, this confidence showed a slight decline at follow-up, suggesting the need for continual training and support.

Imams and chaplains shared that they generally operate in silos, often feeling that they have to handle all concerns of family violence in their community independently and are unaware of available services. Additionally, many shared that they feel overwhelmed by the vast range of their community's demands, may feel unsupported by their boards in their desire to seek additional support and training, and were generally unprepared for the types of situations they are expected to manage. After the training program, participants reported a marked increase in their preparedness to act in situations of abuse, especially in their sense of feeling prepared to appropriately respond to disclosures of abuse, make appropriate referrals, and fulfill legal reporting requirements as necessary. However, their preparedness showed a decline in follow-up, such that while they still felt more prepared than before the training, it was less than how prepared they felt to act immediately following the training. This may demonstrate the confidence imams and chaplains feel immediately after the training with newly found resources and knowledge; however, they may need continued support and resources to maintain that level of perceived preparation.

A significant number of religious leaders also minimized or denied the prevalence of domestic violence among Muslims and its impact as compared with national data. Participants tended to prioritize keeping a marriage intact rather than the safety and well-being of each family member. Many religious leaders subscribed to the belief that it is

better for children to be in a two-parent home, even if that home is violent. These beliefs persisted despite the ensuing long-term psychological, spiritual, and physical damage.

The data revealed that participants showed a modest increase in knowledge of domestic violence after the training, that persisted at follow-up, demonstrating this training model may be an effective tool for increasing such knowledge among imams and chaplains, dispelling stigma, and promoting safety. Participants reported substantial increases in resources when counseling families in terms of the options available to them, suggesting the effective application of their knowledge. However, other tangible actions such as providing information to clients and helping them develop a safety plan decreased. This decline may be explained by the training program's emphasis on relying on DV/mental health experts and advocates for specialized services such as safety planning.

The data found that many of the religious leader participants felt isolated, having little opportunity to engage with their peers or in any type of consultation with other religious leaders or professionals. Additionally, many participants provided various reasons for being reluctant or completely opposed to engaging law enforcement to protect survivors of domestic violence. The religious leaders were often unaware of the complex needs of families impacted by abuse, as well as the available services. Even when participants were aware of services, they often reported not trusting them or being unsure if these services were compatible with Islam. Through this training, which provides them with local and national resources, participants increased the number of referrals they were making, suggesting increased collaboration and partnerships, rather than working in silos. There was an increase in making reports when mandated, contacting DV service providers, and providing referrals. Overall, the training was found to be a useful method for religious leaders to build partnerships and rely on experts to provide support that is outside their training and responsibilities, thereby allowing for interdisciplinary teams that can provide the most effective care and reduce burnout of any one care provider.

## Limitations

Several limitations potentially impact the validity of this study's findings. First, due to the small sample size, these findings cannot be generalized broadly and are treated as preliminary analyses to guide future work. Second, the high rate of attrition in survey responses may result in biased findings. Participants motivated to complete the post-test and follow-up may have been more likely to find benefit from the training and have lasting impacts, thus potentially inflating the program's benefits.

The data collection methods varied slightly from 2018 to 2019. In 2018, the research team came to the training in person to introduce the evaluation and ensure that the participants had completed the pre-test. They returned to ensure that as many participants as possible completed the post-test, although a few participants elected to complete the survey on their own. In 2019, the researcher was unable to go to the training site, and thus all contact with the participants was over email. This may have impacted the percentage of people who completed the survey each year and may explain why all follow-up data that was usable was from 2018 participants.

Third, the participants from the two cohorts may have also differed, given that the 2018 cohort's participation was fully funded by PFP, whereas the 2019 cohort participants were only given partial scholarships due to financial constraints faced by PFP that year. It is uncertain what impact that difference might have had.

Fourth, while the current training program and study combine imams and chaplains, we understand that these two groups are uniquely different in many ways, including education/training, gender (e.g., female chaplains), occupational setting, and the communities they serve. American Muslim chaplains have a unique role in their communities and engage with them in many new and dynamic ways (Stark 2015). Future studies may benefit from exploring the impact of domestic violence training on imams and chaplains separately and, given the scope and financial resources, training may be tailored to the unique needs of each.

Fifth, gender is also an important element to study, whether it is the gender of the trainers or of the participants, and its impact on the learning process and the dynamics of power and of participant engagement with each other and with the trainers. We do not know what impact would occur if the training roles were reversed: the religious expert is female and the mental health expert is male, or if all the trainers and participants were male.

Finally, PFP predominantly works within the American Muslim Sunni community, and while efforts have been made to expand to the broader community, the majority of the training's participants are Sunni religious leaders. Future research may benefit from assessing whether the training program is effective in the Shi'a and other communities, and after sensitively integrating culturally relevant knowledge.

## Future Directions and Possible Extensions of the Training Model

The PFP's model is a unique method for intervening within the community on an issue that tends to carry stigma. Utilizing Islamic texts to frame healthy relationships and making space for discussing the topic from within the framework of Islamic law facilitates culture change at a different level than focusing only on delivering information about domestic violence and building skills.

In planning for future training, one must consider the intersection of gender, religious authority, and the ethnicity of both trainers and participants. Female religious leaders (including Muslim women spiritual leaders and teachers) are far more aware of domestic violence in their congregations, while male religious leaders are more likely to say that no one comes to them with this type of problem (Alkhateeb, Ellis, and Fortune 2001). While there are Muslim women who have deep religious scholarship, they often do not have titles and may not be regarded by imams with the same level of respect accorded to men. At the same time, women outnumber men three to one in the fields of psychology and counseling (Evans 2010; Willyard 2011).

While there is an emerging trend for religious leaders to have some exposure to mental health education (Fawzy 2019), most will not become dually trained; therefore, an interdisciplinary training team must be maintained. Acknowledging the reality of the gender disparity among both religious leaders as well as mental health professionals, while providing an expert from each field as a co-facilitator, can provide a balance. However, we

are aware that maintaining a training model of an imam (male) with a practitioner (female) runs the risk of appearing to collude with structural sexism. Perhaps a female religious scholar and a male mental health professional or domestic violence advocate would create the same balance, but only further research and field work would provide concrete data about its effectiveness.

In addition to subject matter expertise, trainers also need to be comfortable working with religious leaders. Experts in domestic violence may have had significant negative experiences, directly or indirectly, with imams who have caused real harm. In fact, in one case an imam who participated in a PFP training was later investigated and convicted of clergy malpractice and sexual exploitation (Salem 2018). These situations highlight the challenges embedded in the larger structural problem of how imams are trained, vetted, and hired (Askar 2017; Mahmood et al. 2017; Jacobs 2017; Khalil 2017; Yuskaev and Stark 2014). On both a personal and a professional level, mental health professionals and domestic violence advocates may hold feelings of anger, betrayal, and mistrust toward imams as a group, which may spill over into the training context.

These feelings, though understandable, can interfere with the trainers' ability to teach from a place of compassion and maintain a positive view of the participants, most of whom are generally genuinely interested in learning and improving their response to domestic violence. Trainers who are teaching imams should be aware of their own biases toward imams to minimize those biases from potentially interfering with how the message is delivered. Furthermore, when trainers can acknowledge their biases and then put them aside, bringing an open mind and curiosity to the situation, they create the potential for self-transformation as they hear imams sharing their own experiences with abuse, as well as the struggles they face to effect change.

This model and the elements that the PFP has identified as being critical in promoting behavior change among imams may also be applicable in other arenas. Other interventions, especially those on stigmatized topics such as child abuse or addiction, may gain insight from this model to guide their partnerships with religious leaders to promote changes. We hope such efforts will make space for the needed discussions and facilitate post-training collaborations to further their impact on the community's culture.

## Conclusion

The PFP's Imam and Chaplain Training was developed in response to a crucial need in the American Muslim community. Over many years of community application, this training model has continued to evolve through an iterative process to become what it is today. The current study describes the model and preliminary analyses of its efficacy. Acknowledging its caveats and that no model is without drawbacks, this model appears to be a successful one for a community-level intervention. It bridges professionals in different spheres and builds a safe space for the delivery of information and skill building. Through the relationship modeled by the trainers and the relationships built between the participants, the latter build empathy for victims and survivors of abuse, a group that has historically experienced stigma. PFP staff have also focused on responding to what they have learned from participants and maintained a cultural humility. These process elements have

facilitated a long-term collaborative relationship between the PFP and the community, which further increases our credibility and ability to intervene successfully.

This study reveals that the PFP Imam and Chaplain Training is an effective intervention for enhancing knowledge, confidence, and preparation to act in response to domestic violence. Many of these benefits persisted at follow-up, though there was a slight decline in the participants' confidence to respond to domestic violence, indicating a need for continued training and support. In addition to achieving the desired program objectives, each training has engendered many positive impacts that were unexpected. For example, we identified religious leaders with whom we could develop ongoing partnerships and engage as co-facilitators in future events. We were pleased to see training participants deliver Friday sermons on domestic violence, join local domestic violence task forces, and host domestic violence awareness programs in their masjids. We were pleasantly surprised to learn of participants establishing a social services or domestic violence program in the masjid to support survivors, hiring mental health professionals to offer counseling in the masjid, and enrolling in counseling programs themselves to become dually trained. These positive outcomes illustrate the ripple effects that can occur by virtue of the relationships established through attending PFP's intensive workshop.

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# Does Islam Have Its Own Tradition of Spiritual Care? The Twelve Principles of Spiritual Care in the Muhammadan Model

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## Does Islam Have Its Own Tradition of Spiritual Care?

The pastoral-care movement in North America emerged in the early twentieth century, beginning with Anton Boisen's 1925 integration of clergy into clinical settings. Over the decades, it developed into a pragmatic, supervised model of religious care, closely tied to Protestant seminaries and their theology. In parallel, many Muslims in the United States encountered two intersecting developments. First, a minority stream of leadership, who self-identified with the *salaf* (early Muslims) while emphasizing law and ḥadīth, gained disproportionate influence in the context of the American Islam of the 1980s and 1990s. Second, pathways for chaplaincy training remained largely unavailable in Muslim institutions. Many aspiring chaplains therefore studied in Christian seminaries, absorbing Protestant frameworks of pastoral care.

This convergence shaped a distinct landscape: Muslims seeking guidance in spiritual care often looked outside of their own tradition, while those inside the tradition sometimes found themselves presented with a pedagogy that was legalistic, textually literalist, and lacking in compassion. By privileging a method of literal ḥadīth extraction over a broad Sīra-based framework and by marginalizing the ethical architectures of *taṣawwuf* and the *adab* literatures, this pedagogy left gaps precisely in the skills most vital to pastoral work, namely that of gentleness, empathy, and the ability to accompany others in their struggles. The result was often a harsh style of practice, one that shaped communities too often by fear and exclusion rather than by presence and care.

Against this backdrop, a constructive question arises: Does Islam possess its own tradition of spiritual care? In my view, the answer is unequivocally yes. It begins with the Prophet Muhammad himself, whose practice as Messenger, teacher, and guide embodied compassion, wisdom, and long-term vision in his dealings with his early community, or *salaf*. He inspired his companions through love and a deep spirituality that transformed the harshest of desert Arabs into God-loving tender souls imbued with the dignity of their newfound faith, which they sought to share far and wide. Had he been only a political leader or strategist, Islam would never have taken root so deeply across such diverse societies. The presence of the Prophet Muhammad was truly transformative and those who were changed by his companionship became vessels of change themselves. This pattern of

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spiritual companionship, known as *ṣuḥba*, has been transmitted from one generation to the next up to the present day.

This paper seeks to recover and articulate that legacy through highlighting what I call Twelve Muhammadan Principles of Spiritual Care. By "Muhammadan," I mean *al-manhaj al-Muḥammadiyya*, which refers to the Prophet's way of being and acting and not the pejorative Orientalist label "Mohammadan" once used in English. To center the Prophet in this way is not merely rhetorical. Just as Christian pastoral care derives inspiration from the model of Jesus as shepherd, Islamic spiritual care finds its paradigm in the Prophet's companionship, guidance, and mercy. To neglect this is to lose sight of Islam's own resources for pastoral care and to risk seeking in other traditions what already lies at the heart of our own.

What, then, were the principles of caring for the soul that the Prophet Muhammad embodied? In other words, what was his embodied theology or the lived pattern of presence, counsel, consolation, reconciliation, and formation by which he nurtured hearts and communities? The Sīra literature reveals these patterns of behavior, which can inform spiritual care frameworks today. They are not only useful for Muslim spiritual caregivers but constitute a Muhammadan form of embodied theology that can inspire chaplains and religious leaders across faith traditions.

## Twelve Muhammadan Principles of Spiritual Care

### *Principle 1: Do No Harm*

"Do no harm" is the foundational principle of the Muhammadan model of spiritual care, upon which all other principles rest. Carrie Doehring, in *The Practice of Pastoral Care* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), distinguishes between "life-giving" and "life-limiting" lived theologies. Life-limiting theologies foster fear and shame in one's relationship with God and diminish the role of faith in daily life. In the Muslim context, this can lead to perceiving God primarily as a harsh judge poised to punish even minor mistakes, while neglecting the sacred tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī)* that affirms that God's mercy surpasses His wrath, and overlooking that Muslims begin their actions in the name of the Merciful (al-Raḥmān) and Compassionate (al-Raḥīm), not in the name of the Compeller (al-Jabbār), the Avenger (al-Muntaqim), or the Judge (al-Ḥakam). Another *ḥadīth qudsī* reminds us: God the Exalted said: "I am as My servant thinks of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7405; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2675).

When Muslims reverse Islam's mercy-based orientation by emphasizing God's *jalālī* (majestic, awe-inspiring) attributes over His *jamālī* (beautiful, merciful) qualities, they risk cultivating a relationship with Islam rooted in fear and scarcity. This inhibits their ability to nurture love for God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the religion itself. By contrast, Doehring describes life-giving theologies as those that emphasize compassion, enabling spiritual caregivers to "alleviate the punitive judgment, internalized prejudices, and/or spiritual anxiety that cut people off from love—self-love, God's love, relational and communal love" (Doehring 2015, 10).

Recognizing how these Islamic teachings align with foundational sources in pastoral and spiritual care highlights their universality. Examining how the Prophet loved, lived, taught, and guided his community through understanding the Sīra can empower Muslim chaplains and imams to become more effective caregivers. In the past, such teachings were transmitted through *ṣuḥba* (spiritual companionship). Today, however, they must be articulated more explicitly to support contemporary training in spiritual care.

When we consider how Islam spread across the world, a strikingly consistent pattern emerges. In Indonesia, the Wali Songo—the Nine Saints (15th–16th century CE)—introduced Islam by harmonizing it with local culture in ways that complemented, rather than conflicted with, foundational Islamic teachings. In Central Asia, figures such as Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (d. 618/1221), Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 791/1389), and Aḥmad Yasawī (d. 562/1166) became exemplars of this same spirit, just as in China we find thinkers like Wang Daiyu (d. ca. 1076/1660) and Liu Zhi (d. 1148/1730).

Islam first took root in Persia and Iraq not by coercion but through the presence of scholars, teachers, and lovers of God (*awliyāʾ*) whose lives embodied humility and devotion to God. Figures such as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) in Basra, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) in Baghdad, Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810) in Khurasan, and Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261/874) in northern Iran conveyed Islam through their compassion, sincerity, and spiritual discipline, attracting people who saw in them a radiant model of faith. Alongside these pioneers of early Islam, Imām Abū Ḥanīfa of Kufa (d. 150/767) shaped the intellectual and legal imagination of new Muslims. His emphasis on reasoning (*raʾy*) and flexibility within the framework of the law resonated with diverse local populations, allowing Islam to be embraced not as a foreign imposition but as a living faith responsive to human circumstances and cultural realities.

What united these diverse geographies was not conquest or compulsion, but the transformative presence of those who carried the Prophet's example into new lands. People who encountered these teachers, preachers, and Sufis were struck by their spiritual depth and moral beauty. Hearts were moved to the core and were stirred by a longing to share in what they embodied. Many willingly changed the course of their lives and even their faith itself because they fell in love with the spiritual guides, honest merchants, devout scholars, and common folk whose character and presence revealed Islam as something extraordinary and worth emulating.

This was no coincidence. The compassion and gentleness through which Islam spread into new lands were rooted in the teachings and practice of the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Qurʾān reminds him: "If you had been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (Qurʾān 3:159), indicating that his demeanor was the very opposite of harsh and hard-hearted. It was marked by softness, patience, and approachability. The Prophet's conduct as depicted in the Sīra provides countless other examples.

When a man came confessing that he had broken his fast intentionally during Ramadan, the Prophet first instructed him to free a slave. When the man said he could not, the Prophet prescribed fasting two consecutive months. When the man explained he was unable to do even that, the Prophet instructed him to feed sixty poor people. When he admitted he had nothing to give, the Prophet placed dates in his hands and prescribed that

he feed his own family. Each step lightened the burden until it became possible to fulfill, never crushing the man with impossibility. This spirit of compassion and accommodation was not peripheral but rather it was the essence of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Islam spread because it was lived with mercy, and that mercy was faithfully transmitted through his companions and their heirs, continuing to our present day. For Muslim caregivers today, recovering this legacy means recognizing that true orthodoxy lies in gentleness, dignity, and spiritual presence derived from much worship (*ʿibāda*), which were the very qualities that carried Islam from Mecca and Medina to the farthest reaches of the world.

In terms of the principle of "do no harm," the greatest injury a Muslim leader can inflict upon those under their care is to push them further away from faith. In the Islamic tradition, there is no loss that is more painful or more consequential than the loss of one's connection to God. Religious leadership, therefore, is a sacred trust (*amāna*). One might object saying: Does not the Qurʾānic imperative of *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahy ʿan al-munkar*, or commanding the good and forbidding the wrong, oblige us to speak out whenever we see something contrary to Islamic teachings? The answer may be yes, but it is accompanied by a critical qualification. These duties must be exercised with wisdom, for the Qurʾān itself guides us to measure our actions by their consequences, not simply their outward form. Commanding the good may take many expressions such as a smile of encouragement, a moment of silence, one's presence in a gathering that strengthens virtue, or one's absence from a setting of vice. Similarly, forbidding the wrong may manifest in kindness or restraint rather than blunt condemnation. Indeed, what appears outwardly as commanding the good can in reality become a form of commanding the wrong if it is expressed in ways that are harsh, ill-timed, or beyond the capacity of the listener to receive—because the teleological effect of such an act is to repel people from goodness rather than to draw them toward it.

The Qurʾān itself provides explicit evidence for this principle saying, "Do not revile those they call upon besides God, lest in their hostility and ignorance they revile God" (Qurʾān 6:108). Polytheism (*shirk*) is considered the gravest of sins in Islam, yet here believers are instructed to refrain from cursing idols—not because idolatry is defensible, but because of the harmful consequences such cursing would provoke. In this verse, the Qurʾān frames silence itself as a form of *amr bi-l-maʿrūf*, teaching that the measure of commanding right and forbidding wrong lies in its impact on the listener, not merely in the correctness of the words themselves. This distinction underscores the difference between issuing a sound *fiqh* ruling and offering sound pastoral guidance: the former pertains to legal accuracy, while the latter requires sensitivity to context, timing, and the spiritual welfare of the seeker. Both have their place, and religious wisdom lies in discerning which is called for in a given moment.

Thus, spiritual caregivers and Muslim leaders are warned not to confuse theological or juridical precision with pastoral efficacy. The Qurʾān shows that true religious counsel is determined by whether it draws a person nearer to God. To be the cause of pushing someone out of faith—however accurate one's words may appear—is to betray the trust of leadership and risk accountability before God, just as a negligent doctor is held responsible for harming rather than healing. The guiding principle, then, is that no form of religious

counsel should result in alienating people from their faith. This does not mean misrepresenting the foundations of Islam; rather, it means presenting them with wisdom, compassion, and an awareness of human circumstance. Only then can *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahyʿan al-munkar* fulfill its purpose of cultivating faith rather than undermining it.

We see this principle of *do no harm* and the importance of measuring the consequences of one's actions illustrated vividly in the Prophet's own life. One example from the Sīra recounts a bedouin man who accused the Prophet of being stingy and of failing to pay his debts. The companions, outraged by this insult, wished to retaliate, but the Prophet restrained them. He explained that had he responded in kind, the man might have been driven away from Islam, saying in effect, "Had I listened to you, he would have entered the Fire." The point was not the truth of the accusation—for of course the Prophet was neither stingy nor dishonest—but the awareness that defending his personal honor in a harsh manner or allowing his companions to do so would have alienated the man and pushed him further from faith. Instead, the Prophet chose gentleness, demonstrating that the highest priority of religious leadership is to protect a person's connection to God, even when one's own status is questioned. This model reiterates the principle that the greatest harm a religious leader can cause is to be the reason someone loses faith, and therefore all counsel and action must be measured against this standard.

The Prophet's practice consistently emphasized gentleness in leadership. When he sent out ambassadors such as Muʿādh b. Jabal to represent Islam, he instructed them: "Make things easy and do not make them difficult; give glad tidings and do not drive people away (*yassirū wa lā tuʿassirū, bashshirū wa lā tunaffirū*)" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 69; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1733). While this paper will return to this teaching in more detail later, here it is sufficient to note that its spirit reflects the foundational principle of *do no harm*. The Prophet deliberately chose messengers known for their kindness and approachability, understanding that the manner of conveying Islam was as important as the message itself. This principle was later codified in Islamic jurisprudence through the maxim *lā ḍarar wa-lā ḍirār* ("Do not harm and do not reciprocate harm"), which became a cornerstone of Islamic law and ethics. In this way, the Prophet modeled what today might be called emotional intelligence in leadership, which manifested as a deep attunement to the needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of those he addressed. For this reason, the principle of *do no harm* stands as the foundation upon which all other principles of Islamic spiritual care rest.

### *Principle 2: Meet People Where They Are, Not Where You Think They Should Be*

This principle is expressed in the maxim often attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and in some sources to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib saying, "Speak to people according to their intellects (*khāṭibū al-nāsʿalā qadarīʿuqūlihim*)."[1] Its meaning is reflected in the Prophet's practice: He met people where they were and responded in ways suited to their circumstances. In another example, when people asked him, "What is Islam?" he gave different answers

[1] This saying is attributed to ʿAlī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 127 using slightly different wording, but with the same meaning: "Speak to people only according to their level of knowledge. Would you like for Allah and His Messenger to be denied (*Ḥaddithū al-nās bi-mā yaʿrifūna, atuḥibbūna an yukaththaba Allāhu wa rasūluhu*)?"

based on whom he was speaking to. To some, he defined it succinctly as submission to God and the testimony of faith; to others, he set out the five pillars of Islam; and in the famous ḥadīth of Jibrīl, he embedded it within a larger teaching on *īmān* and *iḥsān* (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 50; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 8, 10). When a Bedouin asked what he must do to enter Paradise, the Prophet told him to worship God alone, perform the prayers, give *zakāt*, and fast in Ramadan. The man replied, "By Him who sent you with the truth, I will do no more and no less." After he departed, the Prophet said, "If he is truthful, he will enter Paradise" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 46; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 11–15). At the same time, the Prophet warned his companions that because of the privilege of their closeness to him, they would be held accountable for abandoning even a small portion of his teachings, whereas later generations would be rewarded for clinging even to a tenth of it. We find in a ḥadīth of the Prophet, "You are in a time such that if one of you abandons a tenth of what you have been commanded, he will perish; but there will come a time when whoever among them acts upon a tenth of what he has been commanded will be saved" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2267).

The Qurʾān also conveys this principle in its address to the Mothers of the Believers: "O wives of the Prophet, if any of you commit a clear immorality, the punishment will be doubled for her… but whoever among you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does righteousness—We will give her double reward" (Qurʾān 33:30–31). In each of these cases, expectations were calibrated to context, opportunity, and spiritual capacity.

For spiritual caregivers, this principle has direct implications. God judges each person according to their circumstances, and leaders are called to emulate this divine wisdom by meeting people where they are. To speak to a new Muslim with the expectations appropriate for a lifelong practitioner would risk overwhelming and alienating them, thereby violating the first principle of *do no harm*. Conversely, to treat a devout Muslim of decades as though they had just entered the faith would also be harmful, denying them the higher standards appropriate to their spiritual maturity. True spiritual care requires discernment: to recognize the seeker's stage, to speak in ways they can hear, and to provide guidance that nurtures rather than burdens. In this way, meeting people where they are safeguards the balance between mercy and accountability that lies at the heart of prophetic leadership modeled by the Prophet Muhammad.

### *Principle 3: Connect Before You Correct*

The Prophet Muhammad modeled a way of addressing mistakes that preserved dignity and fostered growth. He was known to say, "What is the matter with people who do such and such?" He was choosing indirect speech rather than confronting individuals by name or embarrassing them in public. This tactful method corrected behavior without shaming the person, and it was effective precisely because it was grounded in the strong personal connections he had cultivated with his companions. It was these bonds of trust and affection that created space for transformation. The Prophet's example teaches that the ability to discern whether words will heal or harm depends first on knowing the person and their context. Without a relationship, guidance risks becoming judgmental rather than pastoral.

*Connect before you correct*[2] is a helpful way of remembering that chaplaincy is not about imposing judgment, but about building trust so that counsel, encouragement, or gentle redirection can be received as care.

Today, this principle is often neglected when people rush to admonish strangers in the mosque for perceived errors in prayer or lapses in practice, despite having no relationship with them, sometimes not even knowing their names. Such interactions do not embody *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahy ʿan al-munkar*, nor do they fulfill the foundational principle of *do no harm*. For Muslim chaplains and religious leaders, the lesson is clear: Guidance and correction must always arise from genuine connection. For it is connection that preserves dignity, opens hearts, and makes care transformative.

***Principle 4: Keep Things Simple. Islam is Neither Hard nor Harsh.***

A consistent feature of the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual guidance was simplicity and ease. Islam, as he modeled it, was neither harsh nor burdensome. As mentioned earlier, his often-repeated instruction to his companions was: "Make things easy and do not make them difficult; give glad tidings and do not drive people away." This principle established that religious leadership is not about overwhelming people with rigid demands, but about conveying the faith in a way that nurtures hope and accessibility.

We see this clearly in the Prophet's instructions to those he entrusted with teaching new Muslim communities. When sending Muʿādh b. Jabal and Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī to guide converts in Yemen, his advice was precisely this: emphasize ease, encouragement, and good news. In many ways, their role as teachers in unfamiliar contexts mirrors the work of chaplains today, who are often called to serve in pluralist and/or public settings. The Prophet understood that if religion was presented with harshness or judgment, it would drive people away; only through gentleness and simplicity could it take root and flourish.

This prophetic principle stands in stark contrast to the harsh tones and critical language that sometimes dominate contemporary religious discourse. When sermons or public preaching center on fear, shame, or judgment, they risk undermining the prophetic Sunna they claim to uphold. The Prophet's model was to keep faith accessible, hopeful, and encouraging, so that people were drawn in rather than turned away. For spiritual caregivers today, this means that clarity, encouragement, and simplicity are not secondary virtues. Rather, they are the heart of prophetic guidance based on the Muhammadan way.

There is also a practical rule of thumb that reinforces this principle: When advising a general audience on matters where there are valid differences of opinion, one should not present the strictest view as the norm but highlight a more lenient one. This does not mean that a leader cannot personally choose a stricter position for themselves; rather, it reflects a pastoral wisdom that aims to keep people within the broad and welcoming boundaries of Islam without altering its foundations. The purpose is not to narrow religion until people feel excluded, but to keep the path open and accessible while remaining faithful to its teachings. For Muslim chaplains, this requires a solid grounding in the foundational sciences of Islam and the ability to navigate diverse opinions responsibly. Proper

[2] "Connect before you correct" is a common maxim in counseling and pastoral ministry. See John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 116.

knowledge enables caregivers to recognize legitimate differences, to make religion easy without misrepresenting it, and to adapt guidance appropriately to individual circumstances. In contrast, insufficient knowledge often leads to two opposite but equally problematic tendencies: either permitting what is impermissible out of ignorance, or—more commonly—resorting to the strictest possible opinion in every matter "to be safe." In reality, deep Islamic literacy of the tradition produces greater flexibility, not less. A knowledgeable leader is able to discern when a more lenient view is appropriate, especially when strictness would alienate or overwhelm those not yet ready for it.

### *Principle 5: Be Flexible, Be Diplomatic, Be Easygoing*

The Qurʾān explicitly reminds the Prophet Muhammad of the importance of gentleness in leadership when it says, "If you had been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (Qurʾān 3:159). The verse highlights that the Prophet's character was defined by the opposite of callousness and rigidity; he embodied softness, diplomacy, and ease. This quality was also evident in those he appointed as representatives of Islam. When he sent Muṣʿab b. ʿUmayr to Medina as a teacher and ambassador, it was because Muṣʿab was known for his diplomacy and leniency. The Prophet did not choose harsh companions for such roles of representing the faith; he selected those who could embody tact and flexibility.

Similarly, we see in the Sīra that when Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib spoke before the Negus of Abyssinia, he presented true views of the Muslims in regards to their rejection of the divinity of Jesus in a manner that was honest yet careful and framed with wisdom so as not to cause unnecessary offense. The Prophet himself praised the quality of gentleness and approachability, saying, "Shall I not inform you of the one for whom the Fire is forbidden? It is every person who is approachable, gentle, and easygoing (*qarīb, hayyin, layyin, sahl*)" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2488; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 3955). Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion, is commonly said to have embodied this prophetic ideal, by being known as *hayyin layyin* (tender-hearted, forbearing), and marked by a softness of spirit that made him deeply beloved among the companions. Taken together, these examples demonstrate a consistent prophetic model: Effective spiritual leadership requires flexibility, diplomacy, and tact, so that truth is conveyed in ways that draw people closer rather than drive them away.

### *Principle 6: Teach, Advise, and Offer Islamic Learning in Measured Portions That People Can Realistically Handle*

Spiritual mentorship is a gradual process, more like a marathon than a sprint. Muslim chaplains are often asked to teach classes on a variety of Islamic topics in university, prison, and community settings. Effective guidance means offering people teaching in portions they can realistically manage, rather than overwhelming them with obligations they are not yet ready to bear. The Qurʾān itself illustrates this principle: Revealed over twenty-three years, its verses introduced legal rulings and moral exhortations step by step, nurturing the companions in a process of *tarbiya* (spiritual upbringing) that allowed them to grow into the religion in a sustainable way. As the Qurʾān says, "And [it is] a Qurʾān which We have

divided so that you might recite it to the people gradually, and We have sent it down in stages" (Qurʾān 17:106).

ʿĀʾisha, the wife of the Prophet, described this pedagogy of gradual growth saying: "The first thing to be revealed was from the shorter *sūra*s, mentioning Paradise and Hell. When the people turned to Islam, then what was *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* was revealed. If the first thing to be revealed had been, 'Do not drink wine,' they would have said, 'We will never give up wine.' And if it had been revealed, 'Do not commit fornication,' they would have said, 'We will never give up fornication'" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4993, on Qurʾān 54:46). The Prophet himself embodied this gradual approach in his counsel to Muʿādh b. Jabal when sending him to Yemen by saying: "Let the first thing to which you call them be the testimony that none has the right to be worshiped but God. If they obey you in that, then inform them that God has enjoined five prayers upon them… If they obey you in that, then inform them that God has made *zakāt* obligatory…" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1458).

For Muslim chaplains and leaders, this gradualism is particularly vital when working with new Muslims, young people, or those returning to practice after a period of distance. Moreover, partial practice should not be undervalued; doing something is always better than doing nothing, and often one good action opens the door to others. The task is not to demand perfection immediately, but to encourage sustainable growth by nurturing what is possible today while leaving room for tomorrow's progress. This requires discernment: Withholding too much may deprive people of the practices that nurture growth, while imposing too many rules and expectations at once may overwhelm them and drive them away. Hence the need to connect before correcting, as well as to understand the individual's capacity and then to teach in measured installments they can handle. In this way, spiritual development becomes steady, sustainable, and rooted in the prophetic model.

### *Principle 7: Be Culturally Relevant*

The Prophet Muhammad consistently demonstrated sensitivity to culture and custom, affirming practices that did not contradict Islam and incorporating them into the life of the Muslim community. In the Sīra, we see that when Ethiopians performed a cultural dance inside the mosque, he did not condemn it as inappropriate or prohibited (*ḥarām*). Rather, he embraced their expression and even watched along with his wife ʿĀʾisha. This spirit of openness signaled that cultural practices, far from being threats to religion, could coexist with and enrich Islamic life so long as they did not conflict with its foundational principles. Similarly, in the Constitution of Medina (*Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna*), the Prophet retained existing tribal structures and customary practices, such as how clans paid blood money, rather than erasing them. In military campaigns, he preserved the traditional role of particular clans carrying banners, recognizing the importance of continuity and identity. Culture, in his Sunna, was not seen as an obstacle to faith but as a vessel through which faith could be lived.

This perspective is also reflected in Islamic jurisprudence, where *ʿurf* (custom) is a recognized consideration in deriving rulings. Imām al-Shāfiʿī famously revised aspects of his legal opinions after moving from Iraq to Egypt, in response to new cultural and social contexts. Historically, Muslims have never viewed culture as inherently harmful; rather, Islam has been embedded in and sustained by cultural practices. In fact, cultural identity

often maintained a sense of Muslim belonging even when religious practice waned. By contrast, the suspicion of culture as a threat to religion is a modern distortion.

For Muslim chaplains and caregivers, the lesson is clear: effective guidance requires an understanding of the culture of the people one serves. Culture here does not merely mean food, clothing, or art, but the deeper norms, patterns, and values that shape communities and institutions. Police forces, prisons, universities, hospitals, and even specific hospital wards each carry their own culture. To be effective, the Muslim caregiver must learn to navigate these environments, to be relatable within them, and to embody the Prophet's example of affirming cultural practices that do not contradict faith. In this way, cultural relevance becomes a cornerstone of the Muhammadan model of spiritual care.

***Principle 8: Serve with Political Intelligence and Strategize for Long-Term Success***

Effective spiritual leadership requires not only compassion and knowledge but also political intelligence; the ability to read situations, honor community dynamics, and strategize for long-term success. The Prophet Muhammad consistently demonstrated this quality in his leadership. When Mecca was conquered, he honored existing social structures, granting protection to the household of Abū Sufyān and extending respect to those with recognized positions of influence. In doing so, he demonstrated the principle of *muʾallafati qulūbihim*: strengthening the hearts of those new or vulnerable in faith by offering support and recognition until their commitment could take root.

The Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya provides another striking example of the Prophet's political intelligence. When the Quraysh refused to acknowledge him as "the Messenger of God" in the treaty and insisted instead on naming him as "Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh," he accepted the compromise, recognizing that to insist on titles would jeopardize the greater goal of peace and long-term stability. Similarly, when they objected to the formula *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, he agreed to omit it for the sake of preserving the agreement. These concessions were not weaknesses; they were strategic choices that secured the treaty and ultimately paved the way for Islam's expansion.

When the Prophet Muhammad sent letters to foreign rulers, he addressed them with the honorific title ʿAẓīm ("Great [one] of…"). Thus, he wrote to Heraclius addressing him as ʿAẓīm al-Rūm (Great one of Byzantium), to Khosrow as ʿAẓīm Fāris (Great one of Persia), and to al-Muqawqis as ʿAẓīm al-Qibṭ (Great one of the Copts), beginning each letter with the formula: "From Muhammad, the servant and Messenger of God, to [name], the Great of [his people]. Peace be upon those who follow guidance" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7; Ibn Hishām 1955, 4:268; Ibn Saʿd 1904, 260). These exchanges were not one-sided: The Prophet also accepted gifts from rulers who corresponded with him, a practice consistent with his own saying, "If I am invited… I respond; and if I am given a gift… I accept" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5178; see also *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2585 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1077). In the "Year of Delegations" (*ʿĀm al-Wufūd*), he similarly honored tribal leaders, teaching his companions to give people of social rank their due respect.

This principle has clear applications for Muslim leaders and chaplains today. Serving communities requires awareness of existing hierarchies and honoring those who carry respect such as elders, founders, and leaders without dismissing their roles. It also requires a particular attentiveness to the power and influence of women in community life.

In many contexts, women organize programs, sustain institutions, and shape family decisions around financial support and charitable giving. To alienate or marginalize women is not only unjust but also counterproductive, creating barriers to communal trust and long-term success. The Prophet's example reminds us that spiritual leadership must be paired with diplomacy, respect for cultural and social structures, and the ability to think beyond the immediate moment toward the broader flourishing of the community.

### *Principle 9: Lead with Affection, Respect, and Compassion*

No religious leadership can succeed without genuine love for the people one serves. The Qurʾān describes the Anṣār of Medina with the words, "They love those who came to them" (Qurʾān 59:9), highlighting that genuine affection was at the heart of their hospitality and spiritual excellence. For Muslim leaders and chaplains, this principle is indispensable: If one harbors disdain or condescension toward a community, people will inevitably sense it. Even polite words, smiles, or gestures of friendliness cannot conceal underlying judgment. The human heart perceives authenticity, and without sincere respect, guidance fails to penetrate. Thus, spiritual caregivers must engage in self-reflection and self-discipline, working on their own *nafs* to cultivate an outlook that seeks the good in those they serve. Only then can their words and presence bear fruit.

The Prophet Muhammad exemplified this principle throughout his life. He was described in the Qurʾān as "a mercy to the worlds" (Qurʾān 21:107). Numerous ḥadīths portray the Prophet Muhammad as continuously praying for his community saying "*ummatī, ummatī*" while showing unfailing compassion even to those who opposed him. The Sīra literature is replete with accounts of his love for his companions and their reciprocal devotion to him. This mutual affection was not incidental but central to the Muhammadan model of *ṣuḥba*, or his spiritual companionship, through which transformation occurred. Within the broader Islamic tradition, this principle was further articulated by leading scholars of spirituality. Imām al-Ghazālī and al-Qushayrī, among others, wrote extensively on *maḥabba* (love of God and those who love God), treating it as the foundational step on the path of spiritual development. Their works demonstrate that affection, respect, and compassion are not peripheral virtues but essential qualities of leadership. For Muslim chaplains today, embodying this principle ensures that care is not merely instructional but transformative, rooted in the Prophet's own model of merciful presence.

### *Principle 10: Do Not Seek Personal Gain from the Community You Serve*

The Qurʾān also describes the Anṣār of Medina saying, "They find in their breasts no need for that which they give" (Qurʾān 59:9). This verse illustrates that they supported the Muhājirūn selflessly, without desire for material benefit or personal advantage. For Muslim leaders and chaplains, this principle is critical: Religious service must not become a means of extracting favors or seeking personal gain. Accepting special treatment, whether in the form of money, gifts, or even status and recognition, constitutes a conflict of interest that undermines one's ability to serve with fairness and sincerity. The Qurʾān further warns of this kind of transactional goodness saying, "Do not invalidate your charities with reminders

(*mann*) and harm" (Qurʾān 2:264). To expect gratitude, privileges, or special recognition in exchange for service is a form of *mann*, reminding others of one's good deeds in order to secure something in return, as mentioned in the verse above. Such expectations reveal an intention tainted by ego rather than one that does good purely for the sake of God.

Classical Muslim spiritual teachers often cautioned: "Do not use your religion to increase your worldly life." In the Naqshbandī tradition, for example, Bahaʾ al-Dīn al-Naqshband and his successors required that their disciples earn a living through a trade before coming to them for spiritual guidance out of fear that their students might be tempted to use their own spiritual guidance of others as a source of income. The great masters of Bukhara, who were known as the *Khwājagān*, were not professional preachers but artisans, merchants, and craftsmen whose spiritual influence extended across Central Asia, Anatolia, India, and beyond. This model ensured that spiritual teaching remained sincere and untainted by financial dependency on followers. Even the guilds of the Silk Road reflected this ethos: blacksmiths, cloth traders, and woodworkers belonged to *ṭuruq* (orders of Islamic spirituality). They supported themselves through their crafts while seeking spiritual refinement and guiding others free of charge. By contrast, contemporary trends of "scholars for dollars," where religious guidance has often been commodified in American Muslim settings and treated as a transactional profession, present real dangers for spiritual integrity.

This is not to dismiss legitimate employment in public institutions, where chaplains are protected by clear ethical guidelines and oversight. Rather, the concern is with dependence on direct and personal favors or transactional preaching that compromises intention. In the Islamic tradition, intention (*niyya*) is central to the validity and value of good actions. The Prophet taught, "Actions are judged by intentions" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1907). Outwardly sound acts lose their value if they are pursued for worldly status or gain. Thus, the chaplain or religious leader must continually struggle with the *nafs*, guarding against subtle desires for recognition, privilege, or reward from the community they serve. In an Islamic framework of caregiving, to serve sincerely for the sake of God means resisting these temptations and ensuring that one's guidance remains pure, free from conflicts of interest, and rooted in trust.

### *Principle 11: Honor Confidentiality and Do Not Seek Out Faults*

The Prophet Muhammad taught his companions that confidentiality is a sacred trust. In a ḥadīth recorded by Abū Dāwūd, he said: "When a man speaks a word and then turns aside [or departs], it is a trust" (*Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4868). This teaching is often summarized in the maxim *al-majālisu bi-l-amāna* which means "gatherings are a trust." In practice, this meant that what was shared in private was not to be disclosed to others.

In a modern context, this principle applies equally to private conversations, written correspondence, and even digital communication, i.e., forwarding messages or sharing screenshots without permission violates the spirit of trust that undergirds authentic relationships. The Prophet Muhammad refused to entertain gossip about his companions, saying: "Do not let anyone convey to me anything about my companions, for I love to come out to you with my heart free of ill will" (*Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4860; *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3896). In other words, he taught his companions not to violate one another's

trust, whether by disclosing what was shared in confidence or by exposing faults and private matters that ought to remain concealed.

The Qurʾān reinforces this ethic in saying, "Do not spy on one another" (Qurʾān 49:12). The Prophet's conduct during the conquest of Mecca provides a practical demonstration of how he honored people's privacy. While his companions destroyed the public idols in the Kaʿba, they were not allowed to enter people's homes to search for or remove their private idols even though the Prophet would have undoubtedly known that many homes still possessed idols in them. He trusted that once the public symbols of idolatry were gone, private remnants would eventually fade. This restraint reflected his conviction that faith is a growth process and that forcing religion upon people would only weaken, not strengthen, their belief. Compulsion produces outward conformity but often at the cost of inner conviction.

Islamic ethics texts also record that during one of his nightly patrols, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb climbed over a wall and came upon a man engaged in wrongdoing. When ʿUmar sought to confront him, the man replied: "O Commander of the Believers, if I have disobeyed God once, you have disobeyed Him three times: you spied, whereas God has forbidden spying: 'Do not spy' (Qurʾān 49:12); you entered by climbing over the roof, whereas God has said, 'Enter houses by their doors' (Qurʾān 2:189); and you entered without greeting, whereas God has said, 'Do not enter houses other than your own until you seek permission and greet their people' (Qurʾān 24:27)" (Al-Ghazālī 2010, 3:372–73). Hearing this, ʿUmar left him, requiring only that he repent. Preserved in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, this account illustrates that even rulers may not violate privacy in order to expose sin.

This principle resonates strongly with modern law, where evidence obtained through intrusion or surveillance is often deemed illegitimate. Just as contemporary legal systems require warrants for searches, the prophetic model emphasizes that confidentiality and respect for private life are integral to justice. For Muslim leaders and chaplains today, the lesson is clear: Safeguard confidentiality, honor private spaces, and resist the temptation to expose or seek out the hidden faults of others. In doing so, they embody the Muhammadan ethic that trust and integrity form the foundation of spiritual care.

### *Principle 12: Cultivate Humility*

Humility is a cornerstone of Islamic spiritual care and leadership. To practice it means recognizing that those one serves may, in fact, be closer to God in ways that are not outwardly visible. A person may carry hidden virtues such as quiet acts of kindness, private worship, or sincere repentance that others cannot see. Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī, in his *al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*, encapsulates this insight in one of his sayings, "A sin which engenders humility and brokenness before God may be better than an act of obedience that breeds arrogance." For those engaged in spiritual care, such humility serves as a safeguard against arrogance and a reminder that true spiritual rank is known only to God.

The Prophet Muhammad modeled humility throughout his life, a quality highlighted in the *shamāʾil* literature. He would sit wherever there was space in a gathering, so that a newcomer could not immediately distinguish him from among his companions. On one occasion, when a man approached him in fear, the Prophet reassured him, saying:

"Take it easy, for I am not a king; I am only the son of a woman who ate dried meat" (Al-Tirmidhī 1987, no. 331).

Such examples demonstrate that authentic religious leadership is not about self-elevation, but about service. For chaplains and spiritual leaders, this humility entails recognizing that the time, knowledge, and compassion they offer are not theirs to claim in the first place. They are divine gifts entrusted to them, and sharing them is a form of *zakāt*. As the saying goes, *zakātu al-ʿilmi nashruhu* which means "the alms of knowledge is to spread it." Likewise, the *zakāt* of health is to use it in service of others, and the *zakāt* of nearness to God is to guide and support His creation.

This perspective deepens when one realizes the Islamic worldview that whatever is given to others such as time, energy, service, or knowledge is in fact the *ḥaqq* (the rightful due) of those who receive it. Furthermore, those who benefit are not merely recipients but sources of divine reward to the one who is giving, for they provide the opportunity for the caregiver to draw nearer to God. In this sense, the caregiver is not doing something extraordinary but simply fulfilling the rights of others. To view service in this way guards against the *mann* that was discussed earlier, or what the Qurʾān refers to as reminding others of favors and by extension expecting recognition or gain. It ensures that one seeks no acknowledgment except from God, recognizing that true greatness lies in humility, and true service lies in giving people what is already theirs by right.

## Conclusion

Together, these twelve principles form a Muhammadan framework of spiritual care that is rooted in the embodied theology of the Prophet as manifested in numerous parts of the Qurʾān, Sīra, and the lived wisdom of the Islamic tradition. From the Prophet's example we learn that effective leadership is not defined by authority or rigidity, but by mercy, humility, tact, and the ability to meet people where they are. Spiritual care is thus an act of stewardship, not ownership: It is about protecting faith rather than endangering it, offering guidance that uplifts rather than burdens, and serving with sincerity while seeking no gain but God's pleasure. For Muslim chaplains and leaders today, these principles offer both inspiration and direction, reminding us that the heart of Islamic leadership lies not in control, but in compassionate presence, faithful integrity, and service to others as a trust from God. At the same time, the Prophet's example speaks more broadly: His way of embodying care, humility, and mercy provides a resource for chaplains and caregivers of all faiths who seek models of spiritual leadership rooted in dignity and compassion.

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# Reflections on a Master of Divinity (MDiv) Thesis: "Professional Muslim Chaplaincy: Defining a Role for Religious Authority and Leadership in the US Context"

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**Abstract:**

*This paper focuses on where Islamic chaplaincy is lacking and what needs to be improved, particularly when it comes to the religious and professional training of Muslim chaplains. In the US context, chaplains possess a certain level of religious training and authority as perceived by institutions and the general public. Supplemental education and standards through endorsement organizations, such as the Muslim Endorsement Council (MEC), and professional organizations, like the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), help fill in gaps in training for Muslim chaplains and hold a standard of accountability. This support is especially needed, because while imams mostly function within the Muslim community in a mosque setting, where Islamic norms are general practice, Muslim chaplains navigate public and private institutions in the larger society, which sometimes require compromise in how chaplains navigate religious gray areas, such as pastoral touch with non-Muslims.*

***Keywords:*** *chaplains, seminary, education, religious authority*

In two books published by Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith—*With the Heart in Mind: The Moral and Emotional Intelligence of the Prophet (S)* (Qasim Publications, 2021) and *When Hearing Becomes Listening: Prophetic Listening and How It Can Transform the World Within Us and Around Us* (Qasim Publications, 2023)—a framework is given for how Muslim religious leaders who have gone through advanced religious education programs can develop into skilled chaplains and pastoral caregivers. While this is an invaluable resource for the North American Muslim community, we must also address the phenomenon of Muslim chaplains who, although skilled in the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) process of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and personal growth, lack the caliber of formal religious education of imams and *ʿālim*s. My road to chaplaincy was different than that of Shaykh Mikaeel and is reflected in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) thesis I completed in 2016 entitled: "Professional Muslim Chaplaincy: Defining a Role for Religious Authority and Leadership in the US Context." The thesis abstract stated:

> This thesis argues that in the US, a Muslim chaplain is located between the *ʿālim*

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> on one side and mental health professionals (such as a social worker) on the other side. Chaplains in the United States serve a role in public institutions (such as hospitals, universities, prisons, and the military) that are characterized as non-denominational or non-religion-specific environments due to the US Constitution's Free Exercise and Establishment clauses. The curriculum in Islamic chaplaincy programs currently do not produce Muslim chaplains with equivalent amounts of knowledge and training at the level of an *ʿālim*, such as deep understanding of Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Qurʾānic commentary (*tafsīr*), ḥadīth, and theology (*ʿaqīda*), nor do these programs train them to work in the same role as that of an imam in a mosque. On the other hand, chaplains are well trained professionals in the areas of spiritual care, spiritual and mental health assessment, rituals and care surrounding life events (such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as grief and trauma), and short-term counseling along with interfaith relations. Chaplains are required to undergo supervised chaplain internships in the form of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and an increasing number of institutions are requiring board certification through professional guilds, such as the Association of Professional Chaplains. These requirements place chaplains significantly higher in their level of professional authority within areas that a typical *ʿālim* has a lower level of knowledge and training. However, Muslim chaplains are distinguished from social workers in that they do undergo some religious studies and training, and they perform rituals and care informed by their religious tradition, therefore possessing a level of religious authority. This thesis proposes that the landscape of leadership and authority in the US Muslim community requires a future vision that characterizes both Muslim chaplains and imams as professionals who serve in different roles with a complimentary working relationship (imams in private institutions such as mosques, and Muslim chaplains in public institutions such as universities, prisons, hospitals, and the military). As chaplains define their role in religious leadership and authority, the role of the imam, in addition to other religious leadership roles, should become more defined in order to meet the needs of Muslim communities in the US.[1] (Elias 2016)

My journey to chaplaincy did not begin with a formal *ʿālimiyya* or imam program, but included supplemental learning from various Muslim teachers and programs after I realized that the chaplaincy program I had enrolled in was teaching me great pastoral care and counseling skills, but was not an Islamic seminary for foundational religious studies from within the Islamic tradition. While I was learning *about* Islam in the areas of theology, law, scripture, and history from qualified Muslim university professors, I was not learning Islam in the traditional sense of an Islamic seminary curriculum. In contrast, Shaykh Mikaeel describes the *ʿālimiyya* curriculum of Ottoman *madrasa*s, which was divided into: (1) the ancillary sciences (*ʿulūm al-āla*); (2) the philosophical sciences (*ʿulūm al-ḥikmiyya*); and (3) the revelatory sciences (*ʿulūm al-sharīʿa*). He explains that this same structure still exists today in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Syria, and throughout South Asia.

[1] This has been edited slightly for clarity and transliteration.

For these students, a framework of Qurʾān memorization and Arabic studies existed that was so thorough that they were not allowed to access the "primary sources, such as the Qurʾān and Hadith literature and the principles of jurisprudence, until one had mastered grammar, rhetoric, and logic" (Smith 2021, 46–47).

My original MDiv thesis, while an argument for Muslim chaplains to have a role of religious authority, also provided an important perspective that still holds true today. Muslim chaplains continue to find themselves on a spectrum of multiple authorities. On the one hand, chaplains are part of secular institutions which provide them with institutional authority by virtue of the position they hold in those institutions. Muslim chaplains navigate persuasive authority as they establish trust and rapport with both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, since chaplains are required to serve all, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation. Chaplains are similar to social workers in carrying a level of professional authority, due to training in the social sciences and mental health care. At the same time, chaplains do engage in religious studies that connect them to the Islamic tradition, lending them some religious authority. As the field of chaplaincy continues to professionalize, more and more Muslim chaplains seek to enhance the above forms of authority through various methods. For example, many Muslim chaplains today choose to pursue the status of BCC (board certified chaplain) with the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC), which carries 50 hours of annual continuing education. Part of the requirement for Muslim chaplains who have achieved BCC is to also maintain ecclesiastical endorsement from a religious endorsing body, since chaplains do carry a level of religious authority in the work that they do.

Reflecting the contrasting journeys which I and Shaykh Mikaeel embarked upon, there are generally two types of chaplains, both with long roads of education. We find religious experts who complete an *ʿālimiyya* curriculum but lack pastoral care and counseling skills. We also find the inverse: those who lack deeper religious expertise but have extensive training in pastoral care and counseling. Oftentimes, Muslims attend Islamic seminaries overseas, as well as North American *ʿālim* programs as more Islamic seminaries become established closer to home, which produce an education that is typically not recognized by Western secular institutions. This can make it difficult for imams to attend Islamic chaplaincy programs, which are typically located in institutions of higher education that require a recognized bachelor's degree. Those Muslims who are accepted into chaplaincy programs at those institutions of higher education often have not gone through a 5-to-6-year *ʿālim* program. This has led to a situation highlighted by Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison in their book *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*:

> The academic requirements and expectations of the Hartford programme have undoubtedly shaped entry into professional Muslim chaplaincy in the USA in recent years. For example, some of our interviewees in the US had liberal arts degrees, professional qualifications in social work or degrees in Arabic and Islamic Studies from American universities. But these academic programmes in Islamic studies would be quite different, in both content and ethos, compared to Muslim institutions offering a traditional Islamic curriculum leading to eventual recognition as an 'alim

> (or 'alima), and usually stressing a strong command of Arabic. (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 153)

In one of the interviews included in the book, a Muslim chaplain also reflected on the curriculum of Islamic chaplaincy programs in the United States at the time:

> "Number two is that Hartford Seminary [now: Hartford International University for Religion and Peace] does not require Arabic facility. It would be hard for us to find a Jewish seminary that doesn't expect a person to read the Torah in Hebrew. I mean… you expect him or her to at least know enough Arabic to at least recite the Qur'an correctly and maybe do some rudimentary translation? I think it's problematic when the Qur'an is so important to us" (Muslim chaplain, interviewed July 2011). (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 154)

It is important to note that in the previous decade, Islamic chaplaincy programs have responded to these criticisms and adjusted the requirements of their chaplaincy programs for Muslims. Hartford International School for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary) now requires "Language Proficiency in Qur'anic Arabic" as part of their Islamic Chaplaincy Pathway (Hartford International School for Religion and Peace, n.d.). Bayan Islamic Graduate School, which began its Islamic chaplaincy program in 2016, currently requires an intermediate level of Arabic to be completed as a part of their Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree in Islamic Chaplaincy (Bayan Islamic Graduate School, n.d.). However, it remains that a student enrolled in any of these chaplaincy programs is still learning about Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic tradition from what can be argued is an *outsider's perspective*. Even when these courses are taught by faculty who are practicing Muslims, they are required to teach as an "impartial" academic in order for these courses to qualify for graduate level course credit at an accredited university as defined by the US Department of Education—course credits which are required to obtain board certification with the APC.

## Looking to the Future

As we look to the future of advancing the field of Islamic chaplaincy in North America, there are two approaches that can be pursued in parallel with one other. One is a temporary stopgap solution to bridge us to a more sustainable framework in the future. This involves grandfathering in those with some deficiencies in their knowledge and training, who are already providing support within institutions. The second approach involves addressing the overall framework itself: This requires a collaboration between chaplaincy programs and traditional Islamic seminaries in order to create a clear roadmap for students to follow to ensure those who specialize in chaplaincy have a solid foundation in the requisite religious knowledge.

### *A Temporary Solution to Fill in Gaps*

As for the first approach, there is already an example of what grandfathering in those chaplains with some deficiencies in religious knowledge can look like. Organizations such as the Muslim Endorsement Council (MEC) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) serve as endorsing bodies for Muslim chaplains. MEC defines ecclesiastical

endorsement as: "a declaration and affirmation of a Chaplain's good standing with the American Muslim community and [it] vouches for the disposition, character and competencies of the man or woman serving in the role of a Muslim Chaplain" (Muslim Endorsement Council, n.d.). Candidates for a MEC endorsement must demonstrate competencies in the following categories: Qurʾānic literacy, Prophetic theory and praxis, cross cultural capability, facilitation skills, and professional theory and practice. Those who apply for a MEC endorsement will be given one of four possible decisions: (1) approval if they meet the full standards; (2) conditional approval if they meet a sufficient amount of standards to function as a chaplain, in which case they must complete specific continuing education requirements until they become fully endorsed; (3) a deferral of endorsement if the board requires further information; or (4) denial, in which case they can reapply for endorsement when they have met the standards (Muslim Endorsement Council, n.d.).

The purpose of endorsement is that endorsing bodies serve as a filter: While some aspiring chaplains may have the natural talents to provide support that is beneficial to care seekers, the reality is that the potential for benefit must be weighed against potential harms. One of those potential harms can come from misguidance based on misunderstandings or misapplications of the Islamic tradition, due to a lack of requisite studies with qualified teachers and programs. In the absence of this filter, anyone can call themselves a Muslim chaplain, even if their beliefs and practices are not in line with those generally accepted by the religious community of Muslims. I recall serving as a chaplain at a hospital and speaking to the director of spiritual care about *taṣawwuf* in the Islamic tradition. She then told me about a local religious group who practiced Sufism but did not identify as Muslim. When I clarified that this group, who considered Sufism as their religion unattached to Islam, would have an interfaith dynamic with local Muslim community members rather than an intrafaith one, my director looked at me with confusion. Secular institutions who hire Muslim chaplains have no way of assessing qualifications in the Islamic tradition, and they are not equipped to do so. This is precisely why the Association of Professional Chaplains requires ecclesiastical endorsement for chaplains, recognizing that there are established religious communities that define their beliefs and practices, and thus what religious leadership and authority entails. The institutions where Muslim chaplains serve, as well as the *people* that Muslim chaplains serve, need to feel confident that the person chosen for the chaplain position has the religious knowledge and ability to accurately represent their faith and faith community.

A second potential harm comes from "wolves in sheep's clothing." In this respect, endorsing bodies serve as institutions of accountability. We have heard too many stories of grave misconduct by religious leaders in positions of authority, such as those documented by In Shaykh's Clothing regarding spiritual abuse.[2] It is important that chaplains are held to high ethical standards and processes of accountability in order to protect care seekers who could be taken advantage of by a charlatan—one who claims to have religious

[2] See "Accounts of Spiritual Abuse," In Shaykh's Clothing, accessed December 30, 2024, https://inshaykhsclothing.com/accounts-of-spiritual-abuse/.

knowledge yet is not connected to any religious teachers or community, or a predator who seeks to use their religious knowledge and connections in order to perpetrate misconduct.

The second element of this stopgap solution is to provide continuing education and support networks to help make up the shortfall in chaplains' training, through organizations like the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC). AMC has served as a large tent organization for a variety of Muslim chaplains, including Sunni and Shia, men and women, volunteer chaplains and those who are paid, those serving within institutions as well as private community organizations, and CPE students all the way to seasoned board certified chaplains.[3] Some of these Muslim chaplains are imams and *ʿālim*s, with the requisite Islamic knowledge but seeking to develop and expand their pastoral skills. Others have advanced pastoral care expertise, but are looking to fill in the gaps of their knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies. I have personally benefited from the programming and professional relationships provided by AMC. These include professional development in the form of an annual conference, monthly webinars, and active cohorts of Muslim chaplains and Muslim CPE students who offer mutual spiritual and emotional support. Perhaps even more importantly, these cohorts serve as an internal consultative body for problem solving for chaplains in the various settings where they serve.[4] A webinar that I personally facilitated as AMC's Chair of Professional Development connected Muslim chaplains with Islamic scholars at Darul Qasim. Shaykh Mohammed Amin Kholwadia gave a presentation on Darul Qasim's ethics consult service, in which an interdisciplinary group of Islamic scholars and physicians provide Islamic bioethics guidance and recommendations to Muslim families engaged in medical decision making. This kind of collaboration between religious scholars and Muslim chaplains is in line with the relationship building described by Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison:

> Muslim chaplains in the States who have undertaken CPE, but not received 'alim training, are clear that this can impose limits on what they can do. They feel that it is important to know what their boundaries might be: "I have to know what I can do and what I can't do, you know, and I have to make alliances with people who can do the things I can't do… I have to have the people I can go to." (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 157)

### *A Longterm Solution for the Education of Muslim Chaplains*

An ideal roadmap for the religious education of Muslim chaplains would be for aspiring students to attend an Islamic seminary for their Arabic and Islamic studies to achieve the requisite religious knowledge, connected to Muslim scholars, for the "content and ethos" that Gilliat-Ray and her coauthors describe. The curriculum would include traditional texts in Arabic on *ʿaqīda*, *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, ḥadīth, *tazkiya* or *taṣawwuf*, and other core subjects. The ethos of such a curriculum involves engaging in the *ijāza* system of studying from teachers who have an *isnād* (chain of transmission) back to the Prophet Muhammad, for reliability

[3] Learn more about the Association of Muslim Chaplains at https://www.associationofmuslimchaplains.org/.
[4] For a list of the types of chaplains which AMC serves, see "Membership Categories," Association of Muslim Chaplains, accessed December 30, 2024, https://www.associationofmuslimchaplains.org/categories-benefits.

of the content of study. It also includes a sense of mentorship, so that students do not only learn for information and details, but they strive to apply the knowledge to their own situations and implement it in their daily lives. A key Islamic principle in the dissemination of religious knowledge is that learning how one is to implement the knowledge (*ʿilm*) with wisdom (*ḥikma*) is done through emulating the practice and character of one's teachers. These same teachers serve as lifelong mentors for graduates of these seminaries, giving them a trusted Muslim scholar who they can consult for more complicated matters they come across in their specific contexts. Having a solid foundation in Arabic and Islamic studies, from within the tradition, also better prepares students for graduate level studies in American academic institutions—where critical thinking and critique, as well as underlying modern and postmodern philosophical assumptions, are part of the curriculum, and can challenge the worldview and assumptions of Muslims and the Islamic tradition.

Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison consider the potential of such a framework and the positive effect it could have on the future of chaplaincy in North America. The authors write, "American Muslim chaplains who combine an 'alim training with an understanding of CPE (of whom there are very few) are actively engaged in developing an Islamic legal framework that aims to bridge the gap between CPE approaches to chaplaincy and traditional Islamic sciences" (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 158). They use the example of Imam Mohamed Magid, the former president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and current resident scholar/executive imam of the ADAMS Center in Virginia, who champions the need for producing:

> al-Fiqh al-Waqi (contextual fiqh), or al-Fiqh al-Aam wal Khas (particular fiqh, as opposed to general understanding of fiqh). He notes that it is necessary for any chaplain to understand three important realities, these being: i) the dominant culture, ii) the sub-culture, iii) individual need. He adds that a chaplain must also have a deep understanding of the institutions in which chaplains serve, and appreciate the influence this might have on the psychology of clients. (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 158)

In my MDiv thesis, I included a quote from Dr. Ingrid Mattson's book *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008) in which she speaks on the need to balance between established *fiqh* rulings, legal maxims (*qawāʿid al-fiqhiyya*), and the objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*). In addition to *al-Fiqh al-Wāqʿī*, there are figures like Dr. Aasim Padela, who is pursuing a *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* framework through the Initiative on Islam and Medicine. Through this initiative, scholars, researchers, and students are able to consult and pursue research, books, and course offerings in the field of Islamic bioethics.[5]

[5] See, for example, the course "An Introduction to the Field of Islamic Bioethics," Initiative on Islam and Medicine, accessed December 30, 2024, https://medicineandislam.org/bioethics-course-2024/.

**The Need for Bridging CPE and Islamic Teachings: A Case Study**

In the same vein as developing *al-Fiqh al-Wāqʿī* and applying *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* as it relates to chaplaincy, in my 2016 MDiv thesis, I wrote: "As a student Muslim chaplain, this is an area I am continuing to learn and understand from my practice in the hospital, such as providing 'pastoral touch' to women" (Elias 2016). The application of contextual *fiqh* and Islamic legal maxims in the field of chaplaincy can be demonstrated through this issue of providing "pastoral touch" to care seekers of the opposite gender. In his journal article in *Chaplaincy Today* entitled "The Intention of Touch in Pastoral Care," Zach Thomas calls "healing touch" what my first CPE educator called "pastoral touch": "To reclaim healing touch as a part of pastoral care we need to understand the basic dynamics of heart/hand coordination" (Thomas 1999, 23). In the same way my CPE educator called chaplaincy both an art and a science, Thomas outlines the contextual factors that guide the proper application of healing touch, writing, "These dynamics reside in a combination of the caregiver's intention, the mutual expectations of those involved in the pastoral interaction, and the choices of setting in which healing touch occurs" (Thomas 1999, 23). Intentional "pastoral touch" can play a key role in an encounter between a care seeker and a chaplain, aiding in the care seeker's healing. However, this can pose a challenge for Muslim chaplains when providing pastoral care to care seekers of the opposite gender. In order to navigate such an issue with confidence, Muslim chaplains must be familiar with the relevant teachings and debate within the Islamic tradition.

Related to the topic of touching the opposite gender, Dr. Hatem al-Haj, a member of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA), recently provided a helpful explanation of the kind of *Fiqh al-ʿĀm wal Khāṣ* that Imam Magid calls for, as well as the application of the *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* that Dr. Ingrid Mattson references. In his social media post about a recent incident between the new leader of Syria and a German diplomat, in which the Syrian leader did not shake the diplomat's hand, Dr. Al-Haj prefaces his point by stating the position of the four *madhāhib* (legal schools of Sunni Islam) and the majority of scholars: that it is generally prohibited for men to shake hands with women. He then writes:

> I would not have faulted him if he had shaken hands with her. Here are my reasons: … it is recognized that if it is indeed prohibited, the nature of the prohibition falls under tahrim al-wasa'il—a prohibition aimed not at something inherently evil but at blocking the means to something inherently evil. This opens the door for the principle of hajah (need) to apply, allowing for exceptions in certain circumstances. We have numerous legal maxims that support this position, including: What is prohibited to block the means to evil may be permitted for a greater benefit. Another maxim states: What is prohibited as a means (tahrim al-wasa'il) becomes permissible for a need or an overriding benefit (maslahah rajihah). Imam Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah has written extensively on the conflict between acts that carry both good and evil or that conflict with each other. His insights should be consulted by anyone in a position of authority. [Majmu' al-Fatawa, Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, 20:48] There is a tendency to overcompensate after tense situations of this nature. Personally, I would rather see him shake hands (without lust) with one

> hundred female dignitaries and remain confident and steadfast in his negotiations than feel compelled to overcompensate later. That said, I commend him for his principled position. It may also hold political significance to avoid appearing overly compromising. (Al-Haj 2025)

Although a social media post about political events, Dr. Hatem al-Haj gives a beneficial commentary and helpful summary of the *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* on this topic, while applying it to a real-life interaction between a Muslim male and non-Muslim female. He also considers the religious and cultural values of each, as well as the larger context and nature of the circumstances, weighing the benefits and harms within that context.

In a similar fashion related to my work as a hospital chaplain, I have been placed in situations where the benefits of physical touch which Shaykh Mikaeel describes in his book, *With the Heart in Mind*, have come into conflict with the general Islamic prohibition against cross-gender physical touch. As a Muslim chaplain navigating largely non-Muslim institutions, there have been times when I believe exceptions have applied, within two tiers of practice. Please note that the interactions described below involved non-Muslim care seekers, since in my experience, cross-gender interactions among Muslims often carry an unspoken awareness of non-touch between men and women.

In the first tier of practice, when I worked at a Level I trauma center, there were many times when the chaplain accompanied the medical team and security to provide an official death notification to legal next of kin. At times, this resulted in one or more family members falling to the ground in extreme grief, and it required me to safely help them get up and into a chair—an action that involved touching. At other times, a family member would need help going to view their deceased loved one either in the patient room or in a separate viewing area, and if they were unsteady on their feet or appeared to be falling, I would help support them and safely get them seated.

On the second tier, there were times when a family member, in their grief or upon getting ready to leave the hospital, would hug me. It did not seem like the proper moment to push them away from me and explain to them Islamic values and practices. Instead, I understood that this came from the practice of the dominant culture, as a gesture of gratitude and an expression of the need they had for pastoral comfort in that moment. Also on the second tier are exceptional situations of patients, such as a homeless person or someone facing severe depression, who requested a chaplain. In these moments, these patients often shared that they were facing extreme isolation, either through their circumstances or through withdrawal. When they shared their stories with me and reached for my hand—either in prayer or during particularly emotional moments as they described their experiences—as a chaplain, I viewed these as moments of "pastoral touch" that were not initiated by the chaplain, but as a need being expressed by the care seeker. These situations, once again, appeared to be "one-off" moments, where an explanation of why I could not touch them based on my faith and practice could have the detrimental effect of further reinforcing their isolation and tendencies to withdraw.

There have also been times as a chaplain when I did hold firm to boundaries. In one instance during my first CPE internship also at a Level I trauma center, a female patient was in such pain that she could not talk. Finally, after a handful of visits, the patient's pain

was controlled sufficiently so that she was able to engage in conversation, and she asked to hold my hands in prayer. When I allowed her to do so, she stroked my hand and appeared to have a look of desire on her face, which was shocking to me and made me very uncomfortable. In the next visit when she again asked to hold my hands in prayer, I declined, even though I could see the disapproval in her eyes and body language. However, it was important in that situation to invoke the principle of *taḥrīm al-wasāʾil* in order to block the means to any potential evil, as Dr. Hatem al-Haj noted above. In addition, if a female colleague hugs me or shakes my hand and I believe that this could become a regular gesture with that individual, I will often take her to the side (so as not to embarrass her) and explain my Islamic beliefs and practice of not touching the opposite gender out of respect. In the majority of these situations, my female colleagues have expressed appreciation for not embarrassing them in the workplace by rejecting their first handshake or hug, and at the same time they were willing to respect my beliefs by not shaking hands or hugging in the future.

It is important for Muslim chaplains to consider the reasons and necessities for "pastoral touch," constantly evaluating and weighing the harms and benefits, since the general Islamic prohibition exists for a reason. The stories of religious clergy slipping into inappropriate relationships with the opposite gender, even consensual relationships, are tales of caution and reminders of how power dynamics, trauma bonding, and relationship rapport can cause lines to become blurred—leading caregivers and care seekers down a road of unprofessional and inappropriate behavior. This is why workplace laws on sexual harassment and policies that govern the interactions and any potential romantic relationships between managers and subordinate employees exist. This is also a blessing in disguise for such a general prohibition existing in the Islamic tradition, since norms based on the dominant culture can change. This can be seen in the common practice of men and women shaking hands, hugging, and even kissing on the cheek with the opposite gender. The #MeToo movement has revealed how this level of comfort with the opposite gender has contributed to widescale misconduct.[6] Now, the current climate and narrative in the dominant culture has changed, and involves consent to touch and cautions against such forward practices, even if the intention is from a place of care.

## Conclusion

While the thoughts penned in my 2016 MDiv thesis were formulated after only one unit of CPE, my reflections today are informed by a one-year CPE residency and over seven years as a staff chaplain in hospitals across three states. I hope it is clear from this reflection piece that the field of chaplaincy has been expanding and deepening over the past decade, and it is not without its successes and shortcomings—though, overall, I believe the developments have been more positive than negative. The overall framework and roadmap to Islamic chaplaincy for Muslims has room for improvement, and the individual dilemmas that

[6] For more on the #MeToo movement, see "History & Inception," MeToo, accessed January 6, 2025, https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/.

Muslim chaplains face are controversial and challenging at times. However, as I wrote in the introduction of my thesis:

> In many ways, what is happening today in the American context, what Muslims are facing and what Muslim chaplains are expected to do in their work in terms of interfaith support, is something not seen in the books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which actually is not unlike what Muslims faced in past contextualization of Islam to new times and places. The goal of US Muslims living in the 21st century is to understand how the [sacred Islamic] texts will interact with our new environment. The relatively new and specific role of professional Muslim chaplains will play a role in that new formulation of authority and leadership. (Elias 2016)

We see these successes in the refinement of standards and accountability from endorsing bodies, such as MEC and ISNA. We also see AMC providing continuing education and professional development programming in order to fill the gaps in education and training, as well as to bring Muslim chaplains together for companionship, mentorship, and problem solving. Each year, with more and more Muslim chaplains achieving board certification with the Association of Professional Chaplains, we see a critical mass growing that may yet lead to the formation of the Muslim community's own professional board certification body, similar to the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) and Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC).

Finally, through the alignment of Islamic seminaries, Islamic chaplaincy higher education programs, Muslim ecclesiastical endorsement bodies, and Muslim chaplaincy organizations, we can create clearer paths for those who have the spiritual motivation and talent to learn and receive training to serve the Muslim community as chaplains. These partnerships can help ensure that the wider Muslim community, public institutions, and professional chaplaincy organizations understand the standards of education and accountability for Muslim chaplains serving Muslim and non-Muslim care seekers. In addition, valuable contributions of Islamic scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*), like Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith and others—rooted soundly in the Islamic tradition and engaging with the social sciences—show us a blueprint for integrating spiritual and pastoral care with both sound religious knowledge and the academic sciences. This can lead to improved curriculums and reference materials for professional Muslim chaplaincy going forward in North America.

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# Spiritual Formation: A CPE Chaplaincy Training Model Based on an Islamic Paradigm

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## Introduction

Two decades ago, the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) established a task force on Islam to invite Muslims to Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a cornerstone in the training of religiously diverse professional chaplains. CPE educators, mainly Christian, incorporate listening skills and theological reflections to examine themes such as empathy and mercy using biblical narratives to help resident chaplains construct theologies of care. A chaplain's spiritual formation includes awareness and integration of one's narrative history, socio-cultural identity, and spiritual/value-based orienting systems (ACPE, n.d.). Chaplains must identify formative and transformative faith experiences and their significance to individual spiritual journeys and articulate how historical narratives inform the relevance of faith in spiritual care. The ACPE standards for spiritual formation expect chaplains to describe how they will integrate faith in providing care, as well as how faith informs spiritual care encounters, one's view of other religions, and how it interacts with other faiths when delivering care. In these residency programs, Muslim chaplains must examine spiritual care themes in the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition, and reflect on Islamic normative texts and narratives that are crucial for their spiritual formation and their understanding of Islamic theology, ethics, and law. This essay sets the stage for a thoughtful discussion on integrating an Islamic-based curriculum into the CPE model.

I organized CPE programs for Muslim chaplains in Jordan and Malaysia in 2020, 2023, and 2024 where participants developed a congruent Islamic spiritual care theory and practice that incorporated narratives found in the Qurʾān and Prophetic tradition, to care for vulnerable and diverse people in Muslim-majority countries. The following is a breakdown of the key points that chaplains incorporated as part of their spiritual formation in a CPE training led by US-trained Christian ACPE educators.

## Islamic Chaplaincy Formation

Western CPE models often center spiritual formation on Christian theology, drawing from biblical sources to reflect on mercy, spiritual distress, hope, and empathy. However, narratives that associate God with evil, as in the story of Job, run contrary to a Muslim's understanding of divine attributes. CPE underscores training chaplains to become better listeners, provide compassionate presence, and assess and address spiritual needs. Even in Muslim majority countries, being a "sick Muslim" can be manifested in a wide variety of psycho-social, relational, and spiritual needs, emphasizing the importance of further

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expanding care for Muslims beyond pastoral responses. A Muslim chaplain must be able to articulate the relevance of spiritual care in Islamic sources and ground its formation and practice in *tawḥīd* (God's Oneness) and the divine attributes of mercy and omnipotence. The Prophet's (peace be upon him) life is rich with examples of how he addressed spiritual pain, suffering, or hope, thereby showing mercy is a divine attribute inseparable from God.

In *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*, Sophie Gilliat-Ray and her co-authors highlighted the absence of a formal institutionalized tradition of pastoral care in Islam and a lack of any articulate written account of how Islamic traditions and scriptural texts are accommodated within contemporary chaplaincy practice (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013). Muslim chaplaincy students in the US are not required to complete formal religious education for admission to a level I CPE unit. Obviously, theological reflections without proper competency in theology, ethics, or law is counterproductive. Therefore, reflections of Muslim students without theological Islamic foundation fall short of offering a theologically grounded perspective on the divine nature and the Prophetic tradition, or exploring what influences a person's response to illness, such as its meaning, divine destiny, mercy, or understanding of life's trials and their relevance to spiritual care.

## An Islamic Paradigm for Spiritual Care

God's Oneness (*tawḥīd*), God-consciousness (*taqwā*), excellence (*iḥsān*), and companionship (*ṣuḥba*), along with similar principals, inform the practice of spiritual care and promote a holistic understanding of life, illness, and death aligned with Islamic beliefs. A Muslim's understanding of *tawḥīd* is very different from the Christian's trinitarian understanding, despite both being monotheistic religions. Muslims consider the invocation of any deity or name other than God theologically reprehensible. Hence, Muslim patients might reject the visits of Christian chaplains since they end their prayer in Jesus's name. In addition, such visits might also trigger fears of proselytization.

There are significant gaps between religious and secular approaches to the ethics of care. The principles of biomedical ethics (including autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice) are understood through a secular lens and guide a physician's decision-making (Beauchamp and Childress 2008). On the other hand, Christian ethics, known as moral theology, has experienced several theological doctrinal changes. Many theologians and institutions either tolerated or justified slavery (using verses like Ephesians 6:5 to justify their stances). Catholics and Protestants condemned people's right to choose their religion freely (Syllabus of Errors 1864); however, they later endorsed religious freedom (The Second Vatican Council's *Dignitatis Humanae* 1962–1965). The prohibition on women holding leadership roles in the church (1 Timothy 2:12) was later changed by Methodist, Episcopal, and Lutheran theologians, while Catholics and some Eastern Orthodox Churches still maintain a male-only priesthood. Various Christians changed their attitudes towards war and just peacemaking, abortion, homosexuality, and capital punishment, demonstrating how Christian ethics, while rooted in biblical principles, have evolved in response to new understandings of justice, human dignity, and social progress. Furthermore, a Christian's belief in salvation or approaches to end-of-life care vary theologically from a Muslim's understanding of death and the afterlife or end-of-life rituals

and practices. The *sharīʿa*'s primary priority of preserving religion plays the central role of guiding Islamic pastoral care and decision-making, whereas the Islamic legal maxim related to harm makes the prevention, removal, and reduction of harm a priority while emphasizing the greater good for the largest number of people, not necessarily individual interests.

Reflecting on pain, suffering, illness, hardship, and salvation yield various meanings and responses among different faiths and among different Muslims. In Islam, God promises salvation, including at life's end, to those who remain patient and steadfast in faith during hardships, embrace God's decree (*qadr*), lead a righteous life in civic and religious practice, and affirm His Oneness. Prophet Muhammad described pain and suffering as a sign of divine mercy, not a punishment. Hence, most Muslims believe suffering is a test from God, who will reward those who persevere. In addition, Muslims interpret the Prophet's narrative on achieving a good death experience (*ḥusn al-khātima*) to mean that salvation is available to those who declare the testimony of faith (*shahāda*) as a death-bed ritual (Al-Nawawī, *kitāb al-janāʾiz*, no. 916). Therefore, some Muslims believe that remaining alert to affirm faith while dying is a major priority, despite the presence of physical pain. As a result, they may refuse to accept any pain-countering measures that lead to sedation.

## Training Muslim Chaplains

Muslim chaplains in Jordan and Malaysia completed several level I CPE units organized by Ziyara Muslim Spiritual Care since 2020. Four ACPE educators, including one Muslim, supervised their spiritual care formation and practice. The training underscored the significance of scrutinizing the students' spiritual formation and practice for congruency with the normative Islamic sources. To enhance Islamic competency, the students attended didactics that articulated a succinct Islamic perspective on the theology of care, end-of-life care, hope, and forgiveness.

Islamic theology (*ʿaqīda*) plays a major role in shaping the chaplains' competency and offers the foundation for their formation. The reflections and prayers of the chaplains and those they serve center on their relationship with God. The belief in the oneness of His divine attributes (*tawḥīd sifāt*) establishes a relationship in which He is the source of compassion, mercy, and justice and humans reflect those divine attributes in their relationships with others. The theology of life, death, and the afterlife influences and shapes the Islamic worldview regarding illness and death. Mercy, trial, and love are types of meanings or interpretations of how Prophet Muhammad understood pain. He responded differently to events such as weeping after his son died, complaining of the pain of abandonment in Ta'if, or embracing the physical pains of his dying. These narratives were instrumental in constructing a care theory that is religiously authentic and culturally sensitive.

Muslim chaplains participating in these CPE units understood spiritual care as companionship and a support system in which their presence witnesses the vulnerability and suffering of patients and the patients' families. They walked alongside patients while sharing stories emphasizing the Prophet's response and highlighting the significance of

following in the Prophet's footsteps. In their reflections on historical narratives, the chaplains shared that the Prophet comforted his companions on several occasions. For example, Abū Bakr showed signs of sadness and anxiety while enroute to Medina during their migration (*hijra*). In response, the Prophet leaned over and reminded him of God's presence. Chaplains explored Qurʾānic verses wherein awareness of His presence is sufficient to calm fears and distress and provide comfort and tranquility.

Historically, the biographies of the Prophet recognize that the Prophet himself was comforted when overwhelmed by the first revelations. Khadīja, his wife, comforted him by maintaining a close physical presence and covering him with a blanket. When the discussion turned theological, she walked alongside her husband and took him to her Christian cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, an expert in matters of divinity. In short, Khadīja demonstrated her support of her husband's religious and emotional welfare through her companionship (*ṣuḥba*), an act of love.

## Cultural and Religious Sensitivity in Chaplaincy

In the United States, Muslim patients are a very small minority, often feeling marginalized and vulnerable. The tendency for Muslim patients to choose "no religious preference" in healthcare settings highlights the need for chaplains who are competent to the needs of Muslim patients, understand diverse Islamic cultures, and are aware of the barriers to spiritual care that Muslims face when seeking spiritual support. In a Muslim-majority country or even a Western context, chaplaincy must offer culturally sensitive care that reflects Islamic perspectives on life's challenges. In the case of Ziyara's program, integrating Islamic theology into CPE training proved beneficial in aligning normative sources with Islamic pastoral care. As a result, chaplains in Malaysia and Jordan were better equipped to support their patients' diverse needs, thereby emphasizing the importance of grounding such training in Islamic sources and providing opportunities for reflection.

## Conclusion

The experiences of Jordanian and Malaysian chaplains in developing spiritual formation and practice in their respective and unique contexts offered a practical lens for understanding the benefits of integrating an Islamic curriculum within CPE curriculum, despite being taught by Christian educators. Didactics and activities, such as role play and culturally relevant case studies, enhanced chaplains' knowledge of Islamic pastoral care and cultural competency, as well as contributed to their ability to apply it in real-life scenarios. Evaluating how Islamic beliefs, ethics, and spirituality informed the practice of student chaplains—imams, nurses, counselors, and physicians—this foundation is crucial for showcasing how culturally relevant CPE models should look. There is a clear need for a curriculum that integrates Islamic theology, ethics, and counseling approaches into the CPE framework, as this would help Muslim chaplains feel more aligned with their own religious and spiritual beliefs while serving a diverse population. Developing such a model

not only addresses the needs of Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Jordan, but will also benefit minority Muslim chaplains in Western contexts.

The call for an Islamic-based CPE model is timely and necessary. Integrating Islamic theology, ethics, and pastoral practices can enable Muslim chaplains to provide holistic care that resonates with their beliefs and their patient's needs. By sharing the experiences of CPE students in their specific Islamic contexts, this short essay highlights the transformative potential of incorporating an Islamic-aligned curriculum into a CPE model, regardless of the country in which the care is taking place.

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# Envisioning Survivor-Centered Anti-Violence Spiritual Care

Safia Mahjebin*

***Of all the violence I continue to survive, spiritual abuse from my family broke me the most. And of all the spiritual violence I continue to survive, the interpersonal dynamics of political violence cause me the greatest psychosocial injury.*** In this deeply personal reflection, I offer a glimpse into my experiences of spiritual violence as a Muslim survivor of gender-based violence and my preliminary visions of what survivor-centered spiritual care can look like.

I draw on my decade-long experience advocating for women's and girls' rights in various settings: non-profit, government, grassroots organizing, research, and political movement; and on various issues: child/forced marriage, domestic and gender-based violence (GBV), and human trafficking. I further illustrate my analysis with ethnographic interviews I conducted in Brooklyn, NYC of Bangladeshi Muslim marriage practices and the development of participants' decision-making capacity over time.[1] Almost all the participants are people I grew up with and my relationships with them illuminate the communal dimension of spiritual violence.[2] I end the article reflecting on my limited experiences with chaplaincy and how it has both further exacerbated the violence I experience and offered me unprecedented pathways to healing.

## I. Experiencing Domestic and Spiritual Violence

At the age of 10, my parents threatened to send me to Bangladesh to be married off. At the time, I believed that God gave my parents the absolute authority to marry me whenever and to whomever they decided—Jannah (Heaven) was under my mother's feet after all.[3]

For me, the most soul-crushing aspect of family violence (FV) was the spiritual abuse. The rhetoric from the pulpit justified family violence: that children ought to

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[1] **Study Title:** Qubūl: An Ethnographic Investigation into the Islamic Legal and Ethical Integrity of Consenting in Current Marriage Practices in the Bangali Neighborhood of Church-McDonald Brooklyn New York

**Protocol Number:** IRB23-0601

[2] There were ten participants: six younger women (18–35 years old), two younger men (18–35 years old), and two older women (over 35 years old), who were parents of some of the younger participants. The ethnographic data supplements the current project through further exploration into experiences of spiritual abuse.

[3] Muʿāwiya ibn Jāhima reported that Jāhima came to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said, "O Messenger of Allah, I intend to join the military expedition, and I seek your counsel." The Prophet said, "**Do you have a mother?**" He said yes. The Prophet then said, "**Stay with her, for Paradise is beneath her feet.**" (*Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, no. 3104)

unconditionally obey their parents, parents had the authority to physically discipline their children, children must always care for their parents, and family ties can never be broken.

At 16, my parents renewed their interest in getting me married. Again, they acted as if I had no agency, but this time I was the inheritor of the ḥadīth that my spiritual ancestors had left to me:

> Ibn Burayda reported that his father said: "A girl came to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and said: 'My father married me to his brother's son so that he might raise his own status thereby.' The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) gave her the choice, and she said: 'I approve of what my father did, but *I wanted women to know* that their fathers have no right to do that.'" (*Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 1874)[4]

This *sadaqa jāriya* (continuous charity)[5] that she had the foresight to bequeath us empowered me to say "no" despite all the retaliatory abuse. And at 19, unmarried, and the survivor of death threats from my own parents, I escaped the broken house.

## II. Defining Spiritual Abuse in The Anti-Violence Movement

In the US, violence in the home or in familial/intimate-partner relationships were viewed as private matters. Through the efforts of the anti-violence movement,[6] attitudes have shifted to approaching it as a social justice issue requiring state intervention and services. When domestic violence was narrowly regarded as "wife beating," the primary services that the anti-violence movement offered was to provide safe shelter and have the police treat the incident as a battery case (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015).[7] The field also came to realize that "battery," although the most manifest sign of abuse, is not the defining characteristic of an abusive relationship. The Duluth model of domestic violence understands abuse as a tactic for someone to exert power and control over another, and this has become the field's mainstream theory (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015). According to this model, physical violence can be completely absent, but other methods of abuse can be used to achieve ***power and control***.[8]

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[4] This ḥadīth was classed as *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Buwaysirī in *Maṣābīḥ al-Zujāja* (2/102). Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi'ī said that it is *ṣaḥīḥ* according to the conditions of Imam Muslim. See "Ruling on the Validity of Forced Marriage," Islam Question & Answer, December 13, 2011, https://islamqa.info/en/answers/163990/ruling-on-the-validity-of-forced-marriage.

[5] *Sadaqa jāriya* is a charitable act that continues to benefit others even past the donor's death. It can come in any form, and is not restricted to being monetary. Common acts of *sadaqa jāriya* include transmitting knowledge, planting trees, raising a pious child, etc.

[6] In order to maintain the diversity, divisions, and decentralization that exists within the movement I have chosen not to capitalize the term.

[7] In the past, police officers would routinely treat incidents of domestic violence, no matter how gruesome, as a "domestic dispute" or a "private affair," often leaving the scene with no documentation or accountability. Many policy and legislative efforts have been made to require police officers to better handle domestic violence incidents.

[8] The Power and Control Wheel maps out the different types of abuse used to exert power and control: financial, verbal, physical, sexual, etc. As the women's movement has diversified and stepped away from universalizing White women's experiences, there have been more power and control wheels developed for specific communities.

As a believer, no form of abuse was more damaging and effective in controlling me than spiritual abuse. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline:

> Signs of spiritual abuse between intimate partners include when an abusive partner:
> - ridicules or insults the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs
> - prevents the other partner from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs
> - uses their partner's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame them
> - forces the children to be raised in a faith that the other partner has not agreed to
> - uses religious texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors (such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse/marital rape) (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.)

With the realization that victims/survivors[9] face multiple types of abuse that affect their lives in different ways, the one stop shop/center (OSC) model for service provision was introduced, creating the space and structure to address intersecting harms in one place or through a referral network (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015, 6). For example, for tackling financial abuse alone, a number of professionals may need to step in. A survivor/victim may need help enrolling in welfare programs, receiving emergency funds, finding temporary or long term-housing, getting access to marital assets, assistance in job readiness, receiving mental health services for stress, etc. Such robust service provision comes from a commitment to supporting a survivor/victim holistically. However, there is a core part of myself that I have felt was unwelcomed: my faith.

## III. Towards a Spiritually Affirming Culture

The anti-violence movement is diverse and decentralized. In my experience working with different people and parts within it, I have found it to be generally critical of organized religion and to have a preference for modern-Western psychotherapy and secular rights-based frameworks. This results in a broadly faith-averse culture that may discourage survivors/victims from seeking services, or worse, that may inflict spiritual violence on them.

### *On Western Psychotherapy*

In general, there is little to no space for survivors/victims to meaningfully bring in their faith. If a faith-oriented survivor/victim needs help due to spiritual abuse, DV service providers are generally ill equipped to address it directly but often offer mental health resources and therapy. The secular mental health field is neither designed nor prepared to effectively address spiritual abuse, in part due to tensions that exist in the field of psychology towards faith. Often therapists and other service providers will ask survivors/victims to compartmentalize their faith, leave it at the door, or, even worse, reduce religion to a source of violence.

[9] I will continue to say "survivor/victim" throughout the article to be inclusive of how people who have experienced abuse identify.

In my own experience, I have tried therapy thrice with service providers of various backgrounds and I have found it difficult to connect. Religion is not merely in my head, a psychological state, or behavioral, but is a set of beliefs I have chosen and been cultivated by that connects me with a higher purpose and Power. It defines who I am and what I am here for. I cannot put into words how broken that act of resistance against my parents made me feel, precisely because of the spiritual weight I knew that relationship carries. To exercise spiritual agency meant that I had to plunge myself into spiritual jeopardy. To do so as a teenager, all alone, was an unimaginable feat that I owe to Allah, my Guardian when my guardians failed me. There was no space to hold my spiritual anguish or my faith-oriented perspective in the anti-violence realm I was in.

Not only have I found mainstream DV service provision to be inadequate for addressing spiritual abuse, I have found a general bias against religion/faith. Many domestic violence service providers understand the problem of spiritual abuse as a problem inherent in religion. They believe religion is inherently patriarchal and will thus always produce gender-based violence. While working as a survivor advocate, I observed that even the Muslim service providers did not want to go anywhere near faith, despite me sharing how necessary and effective it had been in my own case. I felt they were satisfied that I left abuse but skeptical that I used religion to do it. Whether or not it was intentional, I felt my lived experiences were dismissed and my source of strength belittled.

### *On Spiritual Practice and Accommodations*

Domestic violence service providers in the US are under the impression that they must maintain strict secularity to avoid violating the separation between church and state and thus losing eligibility for federal funding. I will revisit this issue in my later discussion on chaplaincy. Service providers may also feel that staying away from religion altogether is best practice. I understand religion/faith can be tricky to navigate, but I experienced double standards where secular spirituality was promoted and faith-based spirituality was made difficult or disappeared.

As an employee in the DV space, I have found it challenging to practice my faith even when I was told it would be accommodated. I had to find my own accommodations and my faith practice was at best tolerated; however, a secular spirituality was promoted. I have observed it to be common practice in the DV/GBV field to appropriate spiritual practices from faith traditions for the sake of mental health and wellness. Yoga equipment and weekly sessions with instructors were funded with taxpayer money for staff and service seekers to use at the NYC Family Justice Centers, one of the largest OSCs in the nation. Breathing, grounding, affirmations, and meditation exercises were often used during work meetings and with service seekers without any signs of the faith traditions they are rooted in. Yoga comes from Hinduism, and breath work, meditation, and grounding can be found in many faith traditions, most commonly associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Many of these practices can also be found in Islam. A straightforward example is *ṣalāt* (the obligatory five times daily prayer): a series of motions in a state of meditation where Muslims ground themselves in their relationship with God while reciting what they believe to be Divine Revelation through measured breaths. Although I was told in my HR training that City employees would have access to meditation rooms and the example of a

Muslim needing to use it for *ṣalāt* was explicitly given during orientation, I never had a place designated for prayer in any of the Family Justice Centers or ENDGBV[10] headquarters. I faced the same challenges while at major women's rights non-profits, even though many of their clients were Muslim. In my experience, the DV/GBV field encouraged the use of *God-less* spiritual practice and actively made accommodations for it, but burdened me to create my own space when I wanted to practice *God-centered* spirituality. I would have to find an empty conference room or a corner of a hallway, lay down my jacket or a piece of paper, and pray.

### *On the Letter and the Spirit of the Law*

In general, the anti-violence movement heavily uses a legislative approach to create change. Survivor-advocates are often a part of those efforts. In my experience it was both empowering and soul draining. My positionalities as young, woman, and Muslim made me susceptible to a kind of political and spiritual violence that I am processing to this day.


*Fig. 1. Speaking in the New York State Capitol in Albany at a press conference to stop legal child marriage. In the picture: Safia Mahjebin (me) in the center, Assemblywoman Amy Paulin (left), and unknown activist to the right.* (Karlin 2017, "N.Y. lawmakers push to raise the age for marriage to 17," *Times Union*, February 15, 2017.

As I was escaping from my violent household, I was restlessly seeking opportunities to help the women and girls in my community who I knew were facing similar gender-based violence. At the time, a coalition of women's organizations had been trying unsuccessfully for years to raise the marital age in New York State from 14 to 17—part of a national movement that focused on state-level organizing to end/reform legal child marriage.[11] These were women 20 plus years my senior, many of them had been a part of the anti-violence movement their entire lives, and most of them were White. They called me in as a survivor-advocate in hopes that a face to the issue would render success. I put my blind trust in the coalition—in part because of their track record passing previous legislation, and in part because I was completely inexperienced in the legislative process. For months I lobbied and did press. I was asked to tell my story while I was still

[10] Acronym for The NYC Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

[11] See Tahirih Justice Center's map on the status of child marriage legislation state by state, https://www.tahirih.org/pubs/50-state-map-of-legislative-reforms-to-limit-or-end-child-marriage-since-2016/.

processing the years of trauma I had been through and all the new challenges I was facing after leaving. I was asked to share the most vulnerable parts of myself over and over again to a media and political machine that was manipulative, self-absorbed, and deeply Islamophobic. I was at the mercy of people who had participated in creating the anti-Muslim NY I grew up in, where my masjid was surveilled, my Islamic school had informants, and my father was abducted. Even though I was fighting to change New York State marriage laws, people took one look at my hijab and infected my work with their own racist imagination of "sharia law." No matter how many times I repeated that it was precisely because of my faith in a Just and Merciful God that I was leaving relationships that were absent of what I believed to be Godly qualities, people's anti-Muslim racism would talk over me. Experiencing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism while doing gender justice work results in a unique type of gender-based, political, and spiritual violence that I still need time to process. What I can name now is how exploitative the entire process was and how deeply my DV colleagues broke my trust. They gave me no preparation, support, or space to name what I was experiencing all at once and as I navigated that constant barrage of racism on my own, I felt abandoned and unprotected by them. I suffered in silence and soldiered through, fueled by a hope that it would all be worth it if we could just pass the law.

"Albany"[12] arbitrarily determined that raising the marital age to 18 was not politically tenable at the time, so advocates had to get creative. They inserted stipulations that minors who married at 17 would have to go through an in-person interview with an attorney trained in domestic violence without the presence of their parents or partners, who may be coercing them. By the time the legislation passed, I wondered, exhausted and flabbergasted, why such common-sense marital reform (which most Americans thought already existed) required so much effort and augmentation. Even more, I was disgusted and jaded at the amount of subsequent political pandering and back patting—it felt more like a win for politicians around election time than for the women and girls in my neighborhood who I was working so hard to protect. Every time I shared my frustrations about the political system with my fellow advocates, I felt pressured to believe that this was the best we had and that playing the political game was a strategic necessity for achieving women's rights.

In her book *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence*, Leigh Goodmark illustrates how the anti-violence movement in the last few decades has opted into a legal and criminal justice approach, relying heavily on government and law enforcement. She warns that as anti-violence work shifts away from community and into the hands of the state, the community becomes more dependent on punitive and power-reliant approaches to violence that are often themselves violent. ***When the movement compels a young and desperate survivor like myself to participate in a corrupt marriage between establishment politics and the non-profit industrial complex towards ends that I had no decision-making power or say in—while subjecting my Muslim identity, faith, and community to racism—it inflicts political and spiritual violence.***

[12] The capital of New York State and where the state legislature is.

Over the years, I continued to peel away at the veneer of women's rights to reveal the silent contract between the anti-violence movement and the state. While working at the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV), I led a social media campaign to raise awareness about the different ways in which sexual violence (SV) manifests. Each staff member participated by sending in a short video. Some raised awareness by saying what a woman wears is not an invitation to SV. As the only Muslim female staff person, I submitted a video raising awareness of how the US military and contractors have used sexual violence as a weapon of war with no accountability in the US-led War on Terror. The head of the communications department informed me that I could not post that video, and when I asked why, I was told that the Mayor's Office wants to keep the focus domestic. The lived experiences of some Afghan, Iraqi, and other women I knew living in the US were dismissed. The women's movement in general contains a strain of feminism that has been used to justify disastrous American militarism. Afghanistan is a prime example and now so is Gaza (Abu-Lughod 2015).[13] The inability and unwillingness of the anti-violence movement to distance itself from pro-war feminism continues to inflict spiritual and political violence on Muslim survivor-advocates like me. ***The more the mainstream women's movement is an accessory to American militarism and the surveillance state, the less freedom survivor-advocates like myself have to speak truth to power and the more we become susceptible to violence by the powerful*** (Goodmark 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson and Zahzah 2023).

### *On Community-Based Solutions*

Goodmark also argues that as anti-violence efforts continue to enable the state to intervene in and determine matters of DV, it disables communities from being able to handle violence among themselves with their own tools. Relying on the law alone, especially when it comes to family laws, is ineffective and often inaccessible to the very people who need it the most. Religion holds the most power of persuasion in many communities across the US, such as the one that I grew up in and now study. Faith is the most important identity for members of such communities—including survivors/victims. God is the most meaningful reference for empowerment in these contexts, for God is more *real* than legislation is within these intimate spaces and relationships. The movement favors a secular rights-based framework

[13] Laura Bush marketed American military aggression against Afghanistan to the public as a way to save Afghan women. Currently, we are witnessing feminist Zionists play a crucial role in the ongoing Gaza genocide by legitimating Israeli propaganda of mass sexual violence. Such claims have repeatedly been investigated, although they have yet to be verified and rely heavily on anti-Muslim racist ideas of Muslim men as hypersexual predators. Even more egregious is how these same feminists beat the drums of war over the outcry of sexual violence by Israeli soldiers in Gaza (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2024). The fact that at least 70% of casualties of the US-Israel genocide are Palestinian women and children, as well as the disastrous impact that Israel's "total siege" had on Palestinian women's health (UN Women 2024), are well-documented facts, as is the fact that general Israeli society has a history of using sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of occupation and war (Abdulhadi 2019). Furthermore, Muslim advocates have been warning us about the collusion of US counter violent extremism (CVE) programs with gender justice initiatives, both internationally and domestically (Alimahomed-Wilson and Zahzah 2023). When will the mainstream movement respond? Shall we perpetually be on the margins?

that is viewed as universal, whereas religious laws are seen as particular and susceptible to patriarchal interpretation. When the movement makes no practical space for faith-based solutions, it is denying the justice oriented, restorative, healing, and transformative qualities of religions (Fortune and Enger 2005).

The New York State (NYS) legislation was amended to 18 instead of 17 in 2021 but I do not know who, if anyone, it helped—that data was not tracked. What I do know is that it didn't help anyone I knew of in my community.

When Shurjomukhi, one of my research participants, was 16, she went on a family vacation to Bangladesh and was surprised to find out her mother had arranged for her to marry a maternal relative. At the time, it was *illegal* for her to marry in Bangladesh but *legal* to marry in New York State. For her parents and her social circles in Bangladesh and NYC, what determined a valid marriage was not the laws of the state (be it Bangladesh, NYS, or the US), but parental approval and the relevant Islamic ritual (*nikāḥ*). Shurjomukhi believed that it was her Islamic obligation to obey her mother and now her husband. In Shurjomukhi's case, the laws not only failed to protect her; they failed to be relevant—a faith-oriented approach could have been more effective.

One step forward in the margins of the movement is the increasing number of Muslim faith sensitive and culturally sensitive DV organizations. Muslim activists have developed a Muslim version of the now ubiquitous Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel (see appendix), which offers a faith-centered lens on how spiritual abuse can intersect with other forms of abuse (Alkhateeb 2012). In the last few decades, Muslim DV organizations have focused a great deal of their efforts on educating Muslim women about their Islamic rights. The most common tactics I have seen employed are know-your-Islamic-rights trainings and campaigns, obtaining *fatwā*s[14] from *fiqh* councils and *muftī*s,[15] searching for different textual interpretations, diversifying religious authority with female scholarship, and changing laws in Muslim majority countries.[16] Muslims in the anti-violence movement have demonstrated that the Islamic tradition can just as effectively advocate for women's wellbeing, whether it be the lone framework or in conjunction with secular-rights frameworks (Alkhateeb 1999; Alwani 2022).

Another way the anti-violence movement disempowers families and communities is the common practice of isolating victims from their abusers. Because DV situations can become fatal, advocates may create a safety plan to help the survivor/victim escape, disappear to a secure location, and cut all contact. When the so-called abuser is your entire family and you are a minor faced with child and forced marriage in an immigrant household, you are being told to abandon your entire social system for a kind of safety that feels like solitary confinement. Cutting ties with your family, even if for safety, carries heavy spiritual implications for Muslims, and can cause severe spiritual harm to survivors/victims.

[14] Islamic jurisprudence-based answers to questions posed by lay Muslims, usually around personal Islamic practice or contemporary social issues.
[15] A person that gives *fatwā*s.
[16] The work of Musawah, WISE (Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity), Karamah, and the early work of the Peaceful Families Project are good examples.

When I introduced my research participants to the NYC Family Justice Centers, one of the leading OSCs in the nation, and the growing number of culturally sensitive DV resources, many of them said they would *not* use them. Patha experienced severe family abuse when she decided to drop her engineering degree three years into the program. Her parents were furious. She said:

> *I dropped engineering for many reasons, but the main one was cheating. Bro, you can't make it if you don't cheat, and everyone cheated. But I couldn't because I knew that if I got a degree with cheating, it would be a ḥarām (Islamically forbidden) degree and that means that any money I made from it would be ḥarām income. I talked to my parents about it, 'cause you know I was getting the degree for them, but they said if other people cheat then it's ok if I cheat. I didn't feel right doing that. The other reason was because I realized my whole life I did everything for my parents and that they were going to make the two biggest decisions of my life for me: who I was gonna marry and what degree I got. If I was gonna get an arranged marriage, then at least I wanted to decide what my degree was. They weren't going to decide both for me. I wanted to have some choice too.*

Patha's faith was the core of her decision making. She believed obeying her parents was the most important thing, but she navigated that with what she felt she owed herself and God. For some time, Patha left home to stay with other relatives because the abuse became unbearable. I asked her if she ever considered reaching out to domestic violence services. She said:

> *Hell no! I don't want to explain to them that the abuse is not from my religion. It would be exhausting to have to explain all the time that Islam doesn't oppress women. Even if they don't say that, I know they are thinking it. They would probably tell me to leave my family and they wouldn't understand me. No matter how bad the abuse got I could never leave my parents. When I left to my relatives' houses, it gave them time to cool off a little bit. Those years were tough, but I had patience with them and things changed. Now they're way more chill.*

No matter how bad the abuse got for Patha, she, like all my participants, would not seek help from DV organizations, even if they were Muslim run:

> *With Muslim domestic violence organizations, they do shelter. I don't need shelter.*[17]

When providers ask faith-oriented people to compartmentalize their spirituality or to self-secularize, they are practicing a form of spiritual violence towards religiously-oriented survivors/victims that may discourage survivors/victims from seeking services. The movement should move towards creating a *faith-affirming culture* that is welcoming for survivors and advocates of all backgrounds. They should work towards ensuring that all DV organizations are deeply rooted and in relationship with the communities they claim to serve.

[17] Though Muslim DV organizations do offer more services, Patha's response indicates an undeniable disconnect between communities and DV organizations and the need to do community outreach.

## IV. The Case for Making Spiritual Care a Domestic Violence Service

An effective way by which the anti-violence movement can usher in a more faith-affirming culture is by introducing spiritual care as a domestic violence service. The chaplaincy model has long been used in the US as a means to: 1) offer professional spiritual and emotional care while also, 2) upholding people's First Amendment right guaranteeing the freedom to practice one's religion even in secular spaces. Institutions can hire chaplains directly or through a third party. One finds chaplains in many kinds of institutions: private and public universities, corporations, the military, prisons, Congress, and hospitals—all paid for by private funds and/or taxpayer money. Interfaith chaplains are becoming increasingly common, where spiritual care is offered to people of various or no faith traditions (Cadge and Rambo 2022). Chaplains tend to care seekers' emotional and spiritual needs by offering empathetic listening, non-judgement presence, prayer, ritual, advocacy for religious accommodations, and more. Becoming a board certified chaplain (BBC) is a rigorous process. One must complete a three-year master's degree in divinity or pastoral care, 1,600 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), receive endorsement from their faith community, and achieve competencies in key areas of spiritual care (ACPE 2025).

At the time of writing, I have completed my Master of Divinity (MDiv) and am 200 hours into CPE at a Catholic hospital. Although I have a long journey ahead of me until I become a board certified interfaith chaplain, I am developing tools which I am already using to spiritually care for the open wounds I carry as a survivor.

### *On Serving Emotional and Spiritual Needs Through Non-Judgmental Presence and Empathetic Listening*

A lifetime of emotional abuse made me incapable of making space for my own feelings and unable to receive the feelings of others. As a chaplain I must be able to identify a care seeker's emotions in real time while also being aware of my own, in order to appropriately respond. In all of my service-oriented positions, I was of the opinion that my feelings shouldn't matter because it will take away space from the care receiver. CPE has taught me that it is impossible to negate myself in any interaction. The best way to give space to others is to be aware of how we share space with each other. For the first time, I can begin to name some of the pent up emotions I carry to this day.

I *feel* immense and irreparable loss. When I decided to leave my abusive family, I had to leave my entire community of hundreds of people I love dearly. So many of my childhood friends have gotten married and now have children, and I have missed all the weddings, graduations, and *ʿaqīqa*s[18]—invitations are between heads of families, and I have been disowned by mine. My departure was ineffably hard for my little sister, and the pain that comes with that distance is an open wound that only gets deeper.

I *feel* painfully and repeatedly betrayed. No one in my community stood up for me, even those who saw some of the abuse. All of the aunties and my sisters in faith didn't even stay in touch to look out for me as I transitioned into isolation. After I lost my community and family, I was seeking justice-oriented relationships and actions. I had

[18] Islamic ritual for a newborn baby.

hoped that the women's rights organizations would give me that. And as I was struggling to make meaning of my trauma by doing whatever I could to stop violence, I *felt* used like a political show pony of suffering for hollow notions of women's rights. I had believed that this country actually cared about women. At times, I would effectively argue with my parents that they could not marry me off if I was under 18 in the US because we shared a false understanding that child marriage was illegal in the US. When I came to know that most US states allowed child marriage, it baffled me. I had seen the US admonish other nations for allowing the practice on the principle of girls' wellbeing. But when given the opportunity, NYS, the very headquarters of the UN, refused to comply with international law and raise the marital age to 18. The belief I had in legal consistency and in the US being progressive in regards to women's rights was broken. I had thought that outside of my violent home was a world that cared for women and girls, but I found it to be a heartbreaking facade with convoluted personal interests. ***I had escaped a violent home, but how do I escape a violent world?***

I *feel* exhausted living in an anti-Muslim and Islamophobic world where forever wars forever put targets on Muslim backs. How could I complete my master's thesis on Islamic marriage contracts and their potential to prevent abuse when a 6-year-old Palestinian boy was murdered hours away from me by his landlord who once played with him?[19] The murderer screamed, "You Muslims must die," as he stabbed him lifeless. ***Every time I try to focus on addressing gender-based violence in my own community, I am reminded in some horrific way that I don't have the privilege of being a woman.***

I *feel* nothing I do is enough because I keep witnessing the same cycles of violence.

I *feel* misaligned with all systems, structures, and frameworks because the institutions of family, religion, law, the academy, and society that have produced them have also justified violence against me and others. This positionality makes me *feel* free but it also makes me *feel* ungrounded and unsafe.

I *feel* grateful that I can now begin to feel that my feelings matter. To validate my own feelings was a major step to being able to hold the hands of a grown man in a hospital gown and make him feel he could cry even while his family in the room told him to keep it bottled up. Through non-judgmental and empathetic listening, chaplains can create sacred space for people to be vulnerable with themselves and allow that inner world to come out even as the outer world tries to suppress it back in.

In my view, empowerment does not come from rights, at least not alone. It comes from a person believing in themselves in spite of what others say and do. Jesmine, another research participant, knew she had the Islamic right to stipulate monogamy in her marriage contract and she knew that polygamy was illegal in NYS. When Jesmine was getting married at 17, she wanted to exercise her rights and her fiance was amenable to it. However, her sister-in-law convinced her otherwise, arguing that there is divine wisdom in God allowing men to have the option and that she should not take that away from her husband. So Jasmine removed the condition for monogamy. Now divorced, she looks back to that decision and acknowledges:

[19] May Wadea Al-Fayoumi rest in peace and power. May he and all the children murdered in hate have Justice. May we be able to protect our children.

> *It made sense in theory to allow it [polygamy] but it wasn't the best decision for me. I'm such a jealous person. You know why you've never met my husband? I don't let any of my friends meet him because I'm afraid he might catch feelings, even a little bit. I don't want to take any risk.*

Jesmine invalidated her own feelings and self-knowledge in order to act out of duty and reason. In cases where survivors/victims know their rights but are unwilling to exercise them, seeing a chaplain can help them navigate how they feel and what they want, and have the confidence to take the action that makes sense for them.

Therapy can also be a space for exploring emotions, but chaplaincy allows a faith-affirming environment where faith-oriented care seekers, like Jesmine, can receive support navigating the religious aspects of their situation. Jesmine is caught between wanting to exercise her Islamic rights and considering her relative's Islamic wisdom to waive it. For survivors/victims to see traditional religious authorities (such as imams) in these cases could be like calling the cops when you need a mental health professional. The spiritual and emotional dimensions of spiritual care can be tricky. The normative and prescriptive angles one finds in traditional religious authority are replaced in chaplaincy with a non-judgmental presence and empathetic listening. Interfaith chaplains are not meant to proselytize, admonish, or tell care seekers what they should or shouldn't do. With a chaplain, Jesmine could explore her religious options, process how she feels about them, weigh the consequences of those decisions, and ultimately, she would decide what is best for her. In other words, a chaplain is someone to walk with on a journey led by the survivor/victim themselves versus an authority figure whose objective is to ensure orthodox observance and compliance. Advocates may recognize this practice as being *survivor-centered*, where the service provider is a thought partner but the survivor/victim is to be believed and is the decision maker. In this way, chaplaincy already has a survivor-centered orientation.

### *On Advocacy, Meaning Making, and Resilience*

On a most basic level, chaplains can do the draining job of informing service providers and people in systems about basic religious observances, accommodations, and religious/cultural ways of thinking—a responsibility that often falls on the already heavy shoulders of survivors/victims. An anti-violence chaplain could ensure that survivors/victims who want religious accommodations can receive them regardless of where their battle against violence takes them: an OSC, the courts, shelters, and anywhere else.

Chaplains can also provide deeper spiritual care by helping faith-oriented survivors create meaning with the option of drawing on their faith tradition to do so. In the book *Muslim Women, Domestic Violence, and Psychotherapy: Theological and Clinical Issues*, Nazila Isgandarova presents four heuristic cases[20] to demonstrate the importance of

[20] "Heuristic case studies investigate the phenomena of subjects' experience, confirming what is known and/or seeking new meaning. As an individual participates in the affairs of living, a situation may arise (phenomena) that invites an expanding awareness of human experience… The subjects of these cases do not

understanding a person's theology in order to administer effective Islamic psychology. She shows how the theology of victims/survivors can make them susceptible to abusive theology and impact their healing (Isgandarova 2019). Though I don't think categorizing care seekers into formal schools of Islamic theology or law is particularly helpful or even possible, ***I can envision a chaplain helping service seekers to map out their theology to identify where the knots of abuse which disempower their agency and their direct connection with God exist, along with their theological strengths that can be a source of resilience, and theological grey zones that need attention.***

*"I wanted women to know that their fathers have no right to do that,"* said the young woman in the ḥadīth. That one bit of Islamic tradition was enough to stir a revolution within me. Dissatisfied with the political/legislative process and still feeling the urgency of helping other women and girls, I felt I had a spiritual obligation to piece together the shards I had collected for myself and offer them a window of possibility. I created a workshop series that integrated what I was learning from the anti-violence movement about healthy, unhealthy, and toxic relationships and connected it to textual excerpts from the Qurʾān and Sunna that encouraged healthy relationships and discouraged abusive practices. It felt like I was bridging the divide between faith and advocacy. In these workshops, I invited my participants, who ranged from middle school to college aged, to imagine what kinds of relationships and future homes they wanted. My ultimate goals for the program were: 1) to offer the tools they needed to maintain their spiritual and legal autonomy, 2) to offer foundational knowledge to cultivate the spiritual agency they needed to say "no" to GBV/FV, and 3) to inspire the audacity to dream their own future as a God-given trust. I made sure to include sessions in which they developed the skills to be critical consumers of culture and resist anti-Muslim tropes of GBV—that no people, tradition, or culture was inherently good or bad. We were critically reflective of our parents' culture, mainstream American culture, and the ways in which music and film perpetuate and romanticize unhealthy and toxic behaviors.

It has been almost a decade since I conducted those workshops and passed legislation. Those girls, now young women, have told me that they never had the framework to speak about the gender-based violence they experienced and to address gender issues until they took my workshop. The participants were most interested in religious frameworks and felt most empowered by knowing their Islamic rights, rather than their civil and human rights. ***I pray that they are living in the homes and with the relationships they had imagined, rooted in a theology that they joyfully believe in.***

I only ran the workshop series for one cohort. Though I knew I made a positive impact on participants, there were many unanswered questions and inner work I had to tend to before I could feel confident in offering "solutions."

represent any specific individuals…rather, each case presents a composite of the many faces of Muslim women who experience domestic violence" (Isgandarova 2019, 8).

This is a common practice among social service providers to draw upon actual cases they have had in order to make up fictional cases for training purposes. This allows the case studies to be tailored to training objectives and, most importantly, protects the confidentiality of survivors.

Because of CPE, I can now self-evaluate that I am experiencing severe psychosocial spiritual distress from repeated rupturing of social relationships which has caused forced isolation, the failure to find value-aligned relationships which has caused alienation, and the constant rejection and misperception of my worldview, sense of self, and perspective by others around me which has caused me to distrust. My feelings of betrayal, loss, exhaustion, misalignment, and nothingness stem from psychosocial relationships and need to be remedied.


*Fig. 2. Logo for the Right to Say "NO!" workshop series. Designed by Safia Mahjebin.*

I lost everything… but I gained a great deal of clarity on what it means to "stand up for justice, even against yourself, your parents, or your closest relatives."[21] I do not regret leaving a broken home and never looking back. But why am I the social outcast in my decision to leave when I know others experience similar situations of abuse? I would also wonder why I would stick my neck out to protect others in abusive relationships, but they wouldn't do the same for me. Do they lack courage or faith? The chaplaincy tool of reframing and the practice of non-judgmental presence has helped me begin to create a new narrative about myself and others. Religion is a vast ocean and different believers are inclined to different aspects. I am justice and loyalty oriented and they are peace and social harmony oriented. I need truth and reconciliation, transformation, and addressing root causes; and I need them urgently. My participants, who are also people from my community, may view justice differently in a way I don't understand. They may be able to forgive injustice in return for familial unity in the long term. Or perhaps they have found love and kindness along with the abusive practices that I did not. My CPE educator asks me, "How is this narrative serving you?" Before I would feel resentment, but with time and non-judgmental presence I am able to craft a story that makes me feel more resilient and open. Although it won't address the feeling of injustice I experienced as a child and teenager, it does allow me a path forward as an adult and makes hope of reconciliation with people I had resented as spiritually bypassing bystanders. Religion is communal and when faith is not reflected and affirmed in relationships, it isolates and causes spiritual violence. The betrayal of my faith community directly impacted my ability to connect with ritual observances and that continues to be a painful point of resentment and mystery.

[21] "O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, Allah is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate [from justice]. If you distort the testimony or refuse to give it, then [know that] Allah is certainly All-Aware of what you do" (Qurʾān 4:135, trans. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*).

To gain relief from some of the abuse, I would go to Jesmine's house. She and her mom would sympathize with me but urge me to never leave my family and to always keep good relations with them. While interviewing her for my research, I asked her why she took that approach. She said:

> *I would see how much you loved your mom but she was so cold to you. I would even tell my mom about this. You see my mom—she is so loving and sweet. I couldn't see what you were going through or what you needed at that time, I could only see what you should be doing. You should have good relationships with your parents, you should forgive them. I kept thinking that's how it should go in the future. Now I can see you did the right thing and I don't have those expectations for you anymore.*

I spent many hours in Jesmine's room processing the abuse and sharing why I couldn't do it anymore even though I know it doesn't align with what we had been taught religiously. At the time, her prescriptive approach only isolated me further. I felt validated to hear her witness some of those intimately abusive moments, but it pained me that she didn't share it with me when I felt like I was going insane processing how unjust the environment I was born into was—when I needed it the most. To see such self-reflection, growth, and for her to no longer prescribe what I should be doing, has allowed me to continue my relationship with Jesmine as a childhood friend onto a life-long friend (*in shā Allāh*, God willing). She could not see the perspective I was living, and I could only see it because I was living it.

Similarly, when it comes to my colleagues and fellow advocates who caused me such psychosocial injury, perhaps they were unaware or did not have the tools to give me the support I needed. If I was not born into this world in the ways that make me susceptible to violence, then I may not have the unique insights on violence that I do and I may have operated in the same ways they did. Reframing my experiences with others who have harmed me to varying degrees in a non-judgmental and empathetic way helps me cope with social injury, but it cannot heal it. I had to leave my community because people in my social circle weren't prepared to handle my situation and my choices. And I had to disengage with the mainstream anti-violence realm until I found my own way, but I will not leave the movement to end violence. Justice and accountability, no matter how imperfect, is needed for healing. I don't know what that would look like yet, but spiritual care gives me language to express my spiritual needs and chaplaincy provides an actionable pathway to meet them. ***I argue that if we acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual abuse, then we ought to acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual healing and wellness, and that requires faith-affirming spiritual services.***

## V. Envisioning Anti-Violence Chaplaincy

In my opinion, if anti-violence spiritual care comes to fruition, survivors/victims must play a leading role in its development, regulation, and oversight for it to be truly survivor-centered. It is highly inadvisable that someone with no personal experience as a survivor/victim or extensive work experience with survivors/victims be an anti-violence chaplain.

Most of the chaplains I have met so far are people I would *not* trust with the spiritual care of survivors/victims. I came to a Master of Divinity program without knowing what chaplaincy was but wanting to do research in a faith-affirming environment. I immediately felt misaligned and alienated from my cohort and professors. There were repeated instances of Islamophobia and racism. And when the genocide began in Gaza and I was in the thick of student anti-war protesting, I was immensely disappointed in chaplaincy, religious, and Islamic organizations for being silent when it mattered the most and them doing little to nothing when actions were the bare minimum, especially as their Muslim and Palestinian colleagues were being doxxed, discriminated against, harassed, and kicked out of institutions. Most of my personal experiences with chaplains have been at universities. Some are champions for the community, whereas others act like a token cog in the shallow DEI scheme at institutions (Alsultany 2023). After completing three years of a chaplaincy degree, I have observed that chaplaincy education prepares people to manage interpersonal relationships, regulate people's internal states, talk things out, and make the other person feel heard; unfortunately, it does not prepare people to be adequate advocates for their communities under the systems and institutions of oppression that sign their paychecks. I have also observed that although chaplaincy education emphasizes working with suffering and grief, many chaplains are incapable of holding adequate space for oppression-based suffering. They can create sacred space when someone dies or is sick, because there is no one you can point to as the cause, except for maybe God. But when it comes to suffering from oppression—like discriminatory hiring practices, White sensibilities made into institutional standards, and arbitrary rules against political expression and protest—chaplaincy education as it currently is does not train you to handle these situations.

I once met with a well-known female scholar and chaplain to advise me on ethical dilemmas I had about my parents. After almost an hour of me trying my best to explain the situation, she recited the last two verses of Sūrat al-Baqara, "Allah never burdens a soul more than it can bear…," and left. I felt completely unheard and unseen. To be honest, most of the time I don't know what I am bearing. I didn't ask for a spiritual feel-good. Chaplaincy as it is currently practiced, I have witnessed, is notorious for spiritual bypassing because it is inherently an institutional accommodation for spirituality.

While working as a survivor-advocate I had come across chaplains working on the margins of DV and never fully registered who they were, what they did, or how I could benefit from them, even though I was in need of spiritual care. In my experience, chaplains who work in DV do not have a formal place in the DV service provision structure and that keeps them underutilized and underdeveloped for anti-violence work. A way of making faith leaders and chaplains better at serving survivors/victims is by going through DV trainings. These trainings, ranging from a few hours to a few days, can equip them to make the right referrals, understand abuse, be more aware of their biases, and not perpetuate harm, but I argue that is simply not enough to enable the spiritual care survivors/victims need (NYSGC 2025; Alliance for Hope International 2025; USCG 2019).

I propose the development of clinical pastoral education (CPE) specifically for domestic and gender-based violence. Currently, CPE is primarily accredited in and tailored for the hospital setting, with some hospitals offering paid year-long residency programs that would result in 1600 hours of specialized training. Anti-violence CPE could be based

in OSCs with similar long-term programs that specialize in DV/GBV. As an advocate, I had many trainings on being aware of bias and best practices, but it was always theoretical. CPE training demands deep personal reflection and exploration of one's personal narrative, identity, internal biases, and how we can use consciousness of those parts of ourselves to give spiritual care to others. Chaplaincy teaches through repeated practice with the support of an educator, peers, and significantly more experienced staff chaplains. Anti-violence chaplains would be well prepared by CPE to navigate issues of internal bias, while the anti-violence movement would prepare them for navigating systematic oppression (though there is much work to be done on anti-Muslim racism) for the sake of providing the best faith-affirming survivor-centered spiritual care. And similar to hospital spiritual care teams, the chaplains ought to be diverse in the faith traditions they represent so they can cater to survivors who want a chaplain of a specific tradition and interfaith so they can hold space for religious diversity.

Undoubtedly, the reason why I am having a transformative experience in CPE is because my educator is a Muslim survivor herself. For survivors like us, spiritual care is a tool of bringing our full selves while creating space for the world we want to see.

Demanding and striving to be free of domestic, family, and gender-based violence, was a triumphant act of spiritual assertion: that my Islam is mine and no one can shake my belief in Allah, the Most Just, the Most Merciful, and no one can convince me that suffering through injustice and abuse is what God wants or would even tolerate.

Sometimes I feel I have nothing but my experiences and faith, and I offer both here in hopes that it can plant a seed towards justice, no matter how imperfect. Perhaps if I had had access to an anti-violence chaplain as a teenager escaping a violent home and as a young woman fighting for policy and systems change in the face of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, I wouldn't feel as alienated, burnt out, and broken as I do now. ***I pray that survivors/victims no longer have to choose between domestic violence and spiritual violence. I pray for a more faith-affirming and anti-racist culture in the anti-violence movement, where survivors/victims of all faith traditions can bring God in with them as they seek peace and justice instead of leaving a core part of themselves at the door.***

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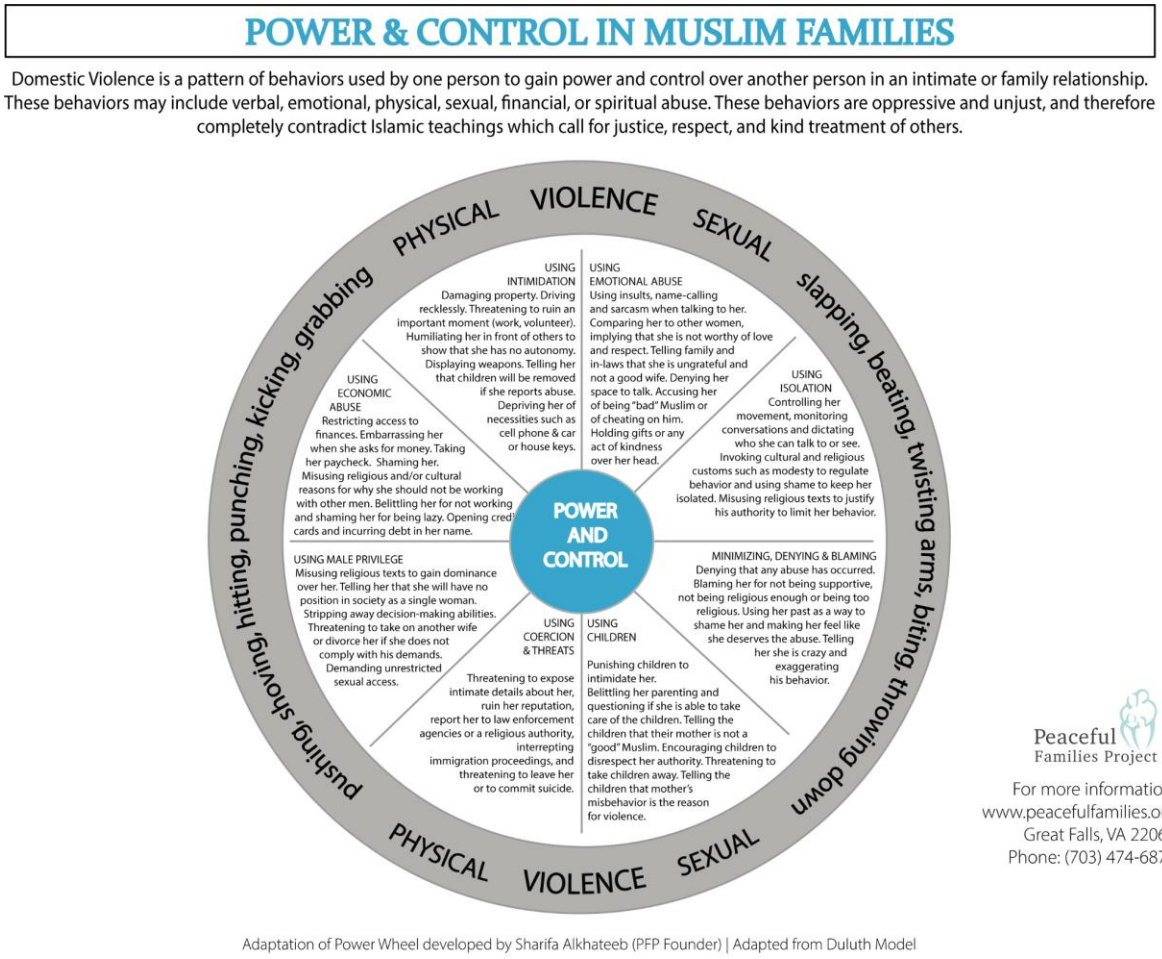
## Appendix


POWER & CONTROL IN MUSLIM FAMILIES
Domestic Violence is a pattern of behaviors used by one person to gain power and control over another person in an intimate or family relationship. These behaviors may include verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, or spiritual abuse. These behaviors are oppressive and unjust, and therefore completely contradict Islamic teachings which call for justice, respect, and kind treatment of others.
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE
SEXUAL
slapping, beating, twisting arms, biting, throwing down
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE
SEXUAL
pushing, shoving, hitting, punching, kicking, grabbing
POWER AND CONTROL
USING INTIMIDATION
Damaging property. Driving recklessly. Threatening to ruin an important moment (work, volunteer). Humiliating her in front of others to show that she has no autonomy. Displaying weapons. Telling her that children will be removed if she reports abuse. Depriving her of necessities such as cell phone & car or house keys.
USING EMOTIONAL ABUSE
Using insults, name-calling and sarcasm when talking to her. Comparing her to other women, implying that she is not worthy of love and respect. Telling family and in-laws that she is ungrateful and not a good wife. Denying her space to talk. Accusing her of being "bad" Muslim or of cheating on him. Holding gifts or any act of kindness over her head.
USING ISOLATION
Controlling her movement, monitoring conversations and dictating who she can talk to or see. Invoking cultural and religious customs such as modesty to regulate behavior and using shame to keep her isolated. Misusing religious texts to justify his authority to limit her behavior.
USING ECONOMIC ABUSE
Restricting access to finances. Embarrassing her when she asks for money. Taking her paycheck. Shaming her. Misusing religious and/or cultural reasons for why she should not be working with other men. Belittling her for not working and shaming her for being lazy. Opening credit cards and incurring debt in her name.
MINIMIZING, DENYING & BLAMING
Denying that any abuse has occurred. Blaming her for not being supportive, not being religious enough or being too religious. Using her past as a way to shame her and making her feel like she deserves the abuse. Telling her she is crazy and exaggerating his behavior.
USING MALE PRIVILEGE
Misusing religious texts to gain dominance over her. Telling her that she will have no position in society as a single woman. Stripping away decision-making abilities. Threatening to take on another wife or divorce her if she does not comply with his demands. Demanding unrestricted sexual access.
USING COERCION & THREATS
Threatening to expose intimate details about her, ruin her reputation, report her to law enforcement agencies or a religious authority, interrepting immigration proceedings, and threatening to leave her or to commit suicide.
USING CHILDREN
Punishing children to intimidate her. Belittling her parenting and questioning if she is able to take care of the children. Telling the children that their mother is not a "good" Muslim. Encouraging children to disrespect her authority. Threatening to take children away. Telling the children that mother's misbehavior is the reason for violence.
Peaceful Families Project
For more information:
www.peacefulfamilies.org
Great Falls, VA 22066
Phone: (703) 474-6870
Adaptation of Power Wheel developed by Sharifa Alkhateeb (PFP Founder) | Adapted from Duluth Model

# Beyond Pastoral Care: Justice-Oriented Islamic Chaplaincy

Ibrahim J. Long*

In recent years, Muslim chaplains across North America have increasingly found themselves at the intersection of religious service, social justice, and internal institutional tensions. Serving in diverse institutions, such as prisons, hospitals, and universities, Muslim chaplains must courageously navigate complex institutional and community politics while supporting individuals who may be experiencing racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia. In doing so, they are called to provide spiritual care and social justice advocacy for the inmates, patients, and students they support. However, this advocacy often comes with significant challenges, among them personal attacks, online harassment, and "doxing" from groups who attack them based on their faith, ethnicity, and humanitarian stances, as seen in the case of university Muslim chaplains who have openly voiced the needs and concerns of Palestinian students (see Ahmad 2025; CBC News 2024; Kim 2024; Muslim Chaplaincy Toronto 2024).

These attacks and other challenges highlight the increasingly volatile and polarized landscape in which Muslim chaplains are called to serve. To enable them to confront these challenges effectively, Islamic chaplaincy programs must look beyond traditional pastoral care and interfaith models of chaplaincy and integrate social work skills into their curriculum. With this broader approach, Muslim chaplains will be better prepared to navigate the complex issues of racism, Islamophobia, and marginalization as they seek to provide spiritual care within our contemporary political and institutional landscapes.

## Social Justice and Spiritual Care

In today's politically charged environment, spiritual care professionals and those they serve may face harassment due to their faith, personal views, race, ethnicity, or community activism. This hostile landscape makes spiritual care and support for marginalized individuals within US and Canadian institutions threatening and complex. Graduate chaplaincy programs that focus solely on pastoral care and interfaith dialogue—without addressing social justice issues like systemic discrimination and racism or equipping students with skills in strategic advocacy—risk leaving Muslim chaplains unprepared for the complex political and institutional challenges they face today.

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### *Case Example: Zayn*[1]

Zayn, a Muslim chaplain at a large university, had built a long and respected career. He was deeply committed to supporting students' spiritual and emotional well-being, providing pastoral care to those in need, and fostering interfaith dialogue across the campus. His work was widely praised as he earned the trust and respect of students and faculty from diverse backgrounds. Zayn's advocacy for Palestinian students, driven by a commitment to student wellness, justice, and inclusion on campus, was a natural extension of his dedication to supporting marginalized voices.

Throughout his career, Zayn passionately engaged in interfaith dialogues, helping bridge divides and supporting understanding among students and faculty of different faiths. However, when tensions between Palestinian students and the university administration escalated during the genocide in Gaza, Zayn found himself facing a situation that his training had not prepared him for. His public support for Palestinian students' right to express their views and experiences was met with accusations of anti-Semitism. Despite his long history of fostering peace and understanding, the accusations intensified, with some students and faculty questioning his character and beliefs. The situation worsened when Zayn began receiving death threats, both online and in person, leaving him feeling vulnerable and isolated. As the situation grew more polarized, Zayn found himself overwhelmed by the institutional politics at play. University staff were divided—some privately expressed support for him, understanding the nature of his work, while others, influenced by the accusations and growing public pressure, called for his removal. The campus atmosphere became increasingly hostile, with rumors swirling and dividing the community.

Despite his training in interfaith dialogue, Zayn struggled to navigate the systemic discrimination he and the Palestinian students he supported encountered both on and off campus. He had never been taught how to facilitate conversations on contentious political issues or address the deeply rooted biases that influenced his campus environment. His role, once fulfilling, now felt like an insurmountable challenge. Zayn did not know how to advocate for policy changes to address the growing polarization or how to support community development in an environment so fractured by political tension. Ultimately, the pressure became too much, and the university administration made the decision to dismiss Zayn, citing accusations of anti-Semitism and the escalating tensions on campus. The dismissal was a crushing blow for Zayn, who had dedicated years to supporting students and fostering an inclusive environment. Feeling betrayed by the institution and disillusioned by the complex dynamics he could not navigate, Zayn was left questioning his place within his community and his career as a chaplain.

## Growth and Expansion

Muslim chaplaincy has existed long before the establishment of the first accredited graduate Islamic chaplaincy program in the early 2000s. However, the creation of a

[1] Zayn's story is a composite case example based on the real experience of several anonymized Muslim chaplains.

graduate program was a crucial step in advancing the profession. This first program and several that followed drew heavily from the curriculum, resources, and approaches used in Christian chaplaincy programs. While this approach enabled these programs and their graduates to quickly find a place among their Christian peers, it is time to evolve and expand the curriculum. Learning from Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist approaches to spiritual care has provided, and continues to provide, unique perspectives for Muslim chaplains to reflect upon their practice. However, Islamic chaplaincy programs need to reflect the unique and evolving needs of Muslims within US and Canadian institutions. To merely adopt or adapt Christian approaches risks overlooking the specific contemporary and historical challenges Muslim chaplains face, for, unlike their White Protestant Christian peers who are privileged by their race and faith, Muslim chaplains—particularly those of color—work in cultural and institutional environments where they and those they serve must confront systemic racism, Islamophobia, and institutional discrimination.

To address these issues, Islamic chaplaincy programs must expand to include a deeper understanding of systemic discrimination and the history of advocacy movements in North America, subjects more often taught in social work programs. Islamic chaplaincy programs should look to the history of Black Muslim advocacy in the prison system and beyond for inspiration. As we prepare chaplains for today and the future, chaplaincy programs must expand their curricula to include relevant social work frameworks—such as anti-oppressive practice, decolonial approaches, and community development—alongside the legacy of Black Muslim advocacy. This will better equip aspiring Muslim chaplains to navigate today's political challenges and address the spiritual and social justice needs of those they serve.

## Roots in Resistance

The history of Muslim chaplaincy work in the United States is deeply intertwined with resisting discrimination and advocating for religious rights and social justice. From its earliest days, Muslim chaplains have understood their role as not just spiritual caregivers, but also as advocates for justice, particularly in the face of institutional racism and Islamophobia. This advocacy has been crucial in shaping their professional identity as individuals providing spiritual care and as leaders committed to addressing the injustices that fellow members of their faith, racial, and cultural community experience within US and Canadian institutions. Muslim chaplains like Zayn are not alone but part of a heritage of advocacy, spiritual support, and resistance.

In the mid-20th century, Black American Muslims actively confronted racial and religious inequalities (see Colley 2014; Smith 1993). Driven by a commitment to racial justice and fair treatment for Muslim inmates, these early pioneers began visiting state and federal prisons to provide spiritual support, education, and advocacy (Kowalski and Becker 2015). The Black American Muslim community, especially members of the Nation of Islam—a socio-religious movement that promotes Black empowerment through a non-orthodox interpretation of Islam—played a crucial role in advocating for Muslim prisoners' religious rights (Jacobs 1980). This advocacy reflected a distinctive approach to pastoral care, for it was grounded in a broader social justice framework that challenged systemic

oppression and focused on securing legal protections for Muslim and other minority faith inmates.

These early leaders' efforts were instrumental in securing vital legal victories, most notably the landmark *Cooper v. Pate* (1964) case, in which the U.S Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment's religious freedom protections extended to prisoners. This victory resulted from sustained legal battles led by Muslim leaders, chaplains, and their allies, who skillfully navigated the intersection of faith and law to challenge unjust systems. Their efforts helped secure religious accommodations and broader protections for Muslim inmates, including access to religious texts, dietary accommodations, and the ability to observe religious practices—while also securing similar rights to inmates of other faiths.

## Revising the Curriculum

Graduate chaplaincy programs must place greater emphasis on the advocacy of early Muslim chaplaincy leaders, examining their skills and drawing inspiration from their efforts. To ensure the field evolves in a way that honors its roots and meets contemporary challenges, programs should collaborate with long-serving Black Muslim chaplains and experienced prison chaplains. As Muslim chaplaincy professionalizes, educators must move beyond Christian models of pastoral care, which have focused on hospital settings, and reconnect with the field's origins in prisons. Like hospital chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy provides chaplaincy students and professionals with many transferable skills. However, prison chaplaincy is unique as the foundational setting for Muslim chaplaincy. It has pushed chaplains to learn how to advocate for religious rights, navigate institutional barriers, and confront systemic challenges.

Muslim prison chaplains have developed critical competencies for decades, including legal advocacy, institutional policy expertise, and community partnership-building. Though at times hindered by systemic challenges—such as those documented by Abdulkadir and Long (2021)—their work has been essential in securing religious accommodations and safeguarding the dignity of incarcerated Muslims. Integrating these skills into chaplaincy training would enhance chaplains' ability to serve effectively across institutional settings. While interfaith dialogue has been a key focus of Muslim chaplaincy programs, it does not fully prepare chaplains to address racism, Islamophobia, and systemic discrimination—issues that arise from both religious and secular actors. To be truly effective, chaplains must also develop advocacy, institutional reform, and social justice skills.

## Honoring Our Roots

Islamic teachings emphasize standing against injustice, a value that must be embedded in chaplaincy education. Training should integrate principles from social work, equipping chaplains with the skills to navigate legal frameworks and systemic inequalities. By bridging Islamic ethics with social work methodologies, chaplains can engage in meaningful advocacy while remaining rooted in their faith. Graduate programs must expand their curricula to include legal advocacy, policy navigation, and the history of

Muslim rights activism in the US (both within the prison system and outside of it). This knowledge will empower chaplains to confidently and effectively provide spiritual care, confront systemic injustices, and support their communities in impactful ways. Chaplains may still face false accusations and wrongful terminations, but their training should prepare them for navigating these potential occurrences. By strengthening their advocacy and institutional dynamics training, chaplaincy programs can help ensure that Muslim chaplains continue to serve with compassion, courage, and wisdom.

The history of Muslim chaplaincy in North America serves as a testament to the resilience and dedication of American Muslims, who have tirelessly fought for their religious rights and established a compassionate and supportive presence across diverse institutions. From the early advocacy of Black American Muslims for their rights in prisons to the growing roles of Muslim chaplains in healthcare, universities, and other sectors, the contributions of Muslim chaplains have been transformative. However, as the field continues to evolve, it is crucial that we reflect on our history and consider the skills necessary to advocate and care for those we serve in the present day.

Islamic chaplaincy programs must take seriously the lessons embedded in this history. These programs risk overlooking a central aspect of the American Muslim chaplaincy legacy by failing to incorporate key elements such as institutional navigation, ethical advocacy, and religious accommodations law in various settings (e.g., prisons vs schools) into their curricula. Understanding the intersection of Islamic values and social justice—particularly through the lens of Black Muslim advocacy and frameworks such as anti-racism, decolonization, and institutional reform—is essential for chaplains to fulfill their professional and religious responsibilities. The legacy of early Black Muslim chaplains, who combined faith with activism, offers a powerful model for the future of chaplaincy, one that is both spiritually grounded and socially engaged.

## Preparing Chaplains for a Complex and Changing Landscape

As we move forward, Islamic chaplaincy programs must evolve. Institutional navigation, ethical advocacy, and religious accommodations law should be considered indispensable tools for chaplains working in complex, often restrictive environments. Case studies of chaplains securing prayer spaces, defending religious attire, and addressing Islamophobia can offer valuable lessons in practical advocacy. Examples of Muslims (including non-chaplains) dealing with the blowback of advocating for justice and reflections on how this may relate to or be dealt with in a chaplaincy context could be an invaluable resource for Muslim chaplains. Incorporating coursework on Islamic ethics and social justice will help ground chaplaincy in Prophetic principles of justice, wisdom in diplomacy, and speaking truth to power, ensuring that advocacy is spiritually and strategically informed.

Programs must also draw upon the history of Muslim chaplaincy in prisons, where chaplains have long fought for religious accommodations in the face of systemic challenges. To better prepare students, graduate programs should expand Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and fieldwork placements by partnering with prison chaplains. Exposure to institutional challenges and advocacy work in prison settings equips chaplains with

essential skills for serving effectively in hospitals, universities, and other institutions facing similar obstacles.

Interdisciplinary collaborations will further strengthen advocacy training. Law schools, policy centers, and human rights organizations can offer workshops on legal literacy, helping chaplains understand the complex legal policies surrounding religious accommodations. Partnerships with ethics departments, social work programs, and theology faculties can provide a deeper understanding of how faith and justice intersect within institutional systems. Furthermore, joint initiatives with advocacy organizations will give chaplains hands-on experience in policy negotiations, community mobilization, and conflict resolution—essential skills for effective and compassionate advocacy. By integrating these essential components into their curricula, Islamic chaplaincy programs can equip graduates with spiritual depth and the practical skills needed to navigate institutional challenges, uphold justice, and advocate for equity—now and in the future.

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# Muslim Chaplains in Law Enforcement: Challenges and Opportunities

Sondos Kholaki*

**Abstract**

*This reflection piece explores the journey of a Muslim female police chaplain navigating the complexities of identity. Highlighting moments of connection, the paper emphasizes the power of authentic engagement and empathy in breaking down barriers. The author's narrative also touches on the broader themes of representation, advocacy fatigue, and the internal conflict experienced when one's values diverge from institutional norms. Ultimately, this piece offers insight into the journey of a Muslim chaplain striving to be a compassionate presence while questioning the impact and limitations of her role in a space where conformity reigns.*

***Keywords:*** *Interfaith chaplaincy, community chaplaincy, identity and representation, moral injury, advocacy*

I entered into the law enforcement world as an anomaly—no familial ties to the police, no social overlap with law enforcement members, and thus little to no understanding of the law enforcement world's "language," culture, and dynamics. Conversely, most police officers and police chaplains with whom I spoke shared one main narrative: inspired by a dad, uncle, grandfather, or brother who had been an officer or in the military and had a desire to "help and serve" people.

I did not seek a police chaplain role. The police chief invited me to the chaplaincy team after we first met at a local Ramadan interfaith iftar. Acknowledging the high concentration of Muslim families in our city, he liked the idea of adding a Muslim police chaplain and admitted that he never knew such a role existed among Muslims. Wide-eyed and hopeful, I accepted the chief's offer to join as a volunteer chaplain in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2021, hoping to provide an outsider's perspective to officers and to understand how potential oppression could exist. Stepping into this role brought with it a mix of hope and hesitation. On the one hand, I felt a deep desire to challenge misconceptions about Muslims among the police and to humanize law enforcement members among the broader community. On the other hand, I grappled with questions about whether I could truly belong in a space that often felt foreign to me—a Muslim woman, a hijabi, and an outsider to police culture. Yet I also felt empowered by the image of a hijab-wearing, Muslim woman serving as a police chaplain—a far cry from

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the stereotypes of Muslim women and chaplains generally. This tension would soon define my journey as I navigated my dual identities and sought to find my place in a world that seemed reluctant to embrace me.

From the start, I felt determined to be seen by the entire department as just as—if not more—capable as my Christian and Jewish counterparts. With professional board certification under my belt, on paper I surpassed the standard criteria required of police chaplains nationwide; however, with no personal or professional law enforcement experience, I was eons behind. I struggled to memorize the titles introduced to me as I walked through the department—sergeant, lieutenant, chief, assistant chief—and how they ranked. I stole desperate glances at name tags to remember those introduced to me: Mark, Mike, Matt, Jeff, Rob. The number of one-syllable first names seemed endless.

As a hospital chaplain already struggling to balance work and family commitments, I joined the police chaplaincy team with disclaimers around my availability as a volunteer per diem. "Even a couple of hours a week, or even a month, would be welcomed," the chief reassured me. With expectations set, I began the grueling mandatory onboarding process that all officers undergo before joining—completing the application packet; scheduling interviews that included a polygraph (lie detector) test; and even providing names of friends, family members, employers, and community members who were interviewed about me by an investigator. At the end, I was shown a fat binder of my entire life and told that I had passed the onboarding process. I made several trips to the nearest law enforcement gear store, where I was fitted for a number of shirts, pants, jackets, and accessories included as part of my uniform sets—casualwear, business, and formal. I also received a shiny badge that identified me as a "Chaplain." I admired the crescent and star symbol (commonly denoting Islam) directly underneath the identifier.

While researching the role of the pastor and rabbi who had joined as police chaplains a decade earlier, I stumbled upon a social media post with pictures of their "swearing in" ceremony. I wondered nervously what that ceremony would be like for me. The chief and chaplaincy team lead encouraged me to invite my friends and family to the next city council meeting, where I would be introduced formally as the new chaplaincy addition. My family (including my 90-year-old grandmother) proudly filled up the first two rows of the beautiful city council room as I stood in front, my heart beating wildly, clutching my *sibḥa* beads for support. The chief approached the podium and read my biography by way of introduction, welcomed me to the team, and posed for pictures as my family applauded loudly. The city council meeting then continued on as usual. I felt relieved that I did not have to speak, but I wondered about the absence of the swearing-in; maybe they had stopped swearing-in chaplains these days. The next part of my onboarding included attending the 6am and 6pm briefings at the department over the course of a few days to introduce myself in person alongside the other chaplains. During these interactions, I noticed myself overemphasizing my hospital training in trauma and crisis. I felt awkward and uncomfortable boasting about myself in that way and examined my desire to overcompensate for my lack of connection to the police world.

In reality, my role as police chaplain shared many of the same qualities as my role at the hospital. Serving as a chaplain translates into various means of support, such as remaining available on-call for death notifications or onsite traumas alongside officers,

attending official city and law enforcement related events and banquets, spending time with officers, popping in on briefings as necessary, and dropping by the department to establish familiarity and presence with staff. As a board-certified chaplain, I understood the skills necessary to serve; however, the context remained a mystery for me. To help familiarize myself, I pored over books written by other police chaplains—all Christian males—that a close friend gifted me out of her excitement for my appointment. I learned that these chaplains carried guns as part of their uniform (!), assisted the officers on pursuits (on foot and in the police vehicle!), and patrolled alongside officers for hours in the dead of night. I felt intimidated by most of these images and wondered how I would fit into the team.

Recognizing my limited time between the hospital and my family commitments, I immediately scheduled two ride-alongs per month to begin familiarizing myself with the department and its officers. A "ride-along" refers to the chaplain accompanying a police officer during his/her shift, riding in the patrol car as he/she responds to calls and carries out his/her duties. This experience allows the chaplain to observe law enforcement work firsthand, build rapport with officers, and provide support or a calming presence during potentially high-stress situations. I chose Friday nights after work when my kids attended youth groups and my husband frequently visited with friends. Most of the time, I prayed *maghrib* at home and then drove to the police station to meet my assigned officer; however, on a handful of occasions, I had to excuse myself from a scene to pray *maghrib* nearby. One time, with instructions not to leave the scene of a vandalism, I had to ask the owner of the wrecked apartment studio for a corner to complete my prayers and I scrunched myself halfway into a closet for privacy.

Spending almost four hours with an officer riding around the city provided me with ample opportunities to get to know him/her on a personal level and understand the nuances of the job. I also witnessed the softer side of police officers that the public may not always see. For example, my heart warmed when I learned of an officer "turning a blind eye" to someone clearly on hard times selling wares at a pop-up stand on the sidewalk, or when an officer pulled over a car with the headlights turned off and helped the new driver navigate the switch "on" rather than issue a ticket. The chaplain coordinator of the department paired me up with a different officer each time. The female officers—to whom I was almost exclusively assigned until I informed the scheduler that I felt comfortable riding with all officers, regardless of gender—kept their walls up but remained polite as we conversed. I wondered if they sensed the agenda behind the coordination of assigning me as a female chaplain with them as a female officer and refused to play into the hidden motive. Perhaps they, too, wanted to be seen as equals despite their minority status on the team.

On ride-alongs, I always asked how and why the officer joined law enforcement, what he/she enjoyed about the role, found challenging, and how he/she liked to "unwind" off duty. Meanwhile, we drove around responding to incoming calls ranging from domestic violence reports to burglaries. Most of the time, the officer invited me to join him/her on foot; but other times, the officer instructed me to remain in the car with the doors locked. I always wore a bullet-proof vest under my polo shirt and quietly recited the *duʿāʾ* for protection for both of us as I climbed into the passenger seat next to the stored rifles. My role—apart from making conversation and getting to know the officer—included providing on-site emotional support to victims, offering an extra pair of eyes taking account of the

scene, exuding non-anxious presence for high adrenaline moments, and embodying a reminder for all to serve and be served with higher standards. When I did step onto a scene, I would receive curious and puzzled glances by community members as they eyed my hijab and the CHAPLAIN embroidered onto the back of my shirt. More often, I played the role of an observer rather than trying to intervene and potentially risk the safety of the officer with my inexperience. I felt nothing like those police chaplains in the books I had read who carried guns and "covered" the officer in pursuits.

After about a year or so of sparsely scheduled ride-alongs and city event attendances to provide the invocation or benediction, I still felt ill-equipped to serve in the law enforcement world. Despite the police chief's reassurance that any time was enough time volunteered, I knew that a chaplain's efficacy correlates directly to presence and visibility at the institution. If I could not give more time, I needed some help to understand how to make the best use of my time. Thus, when I learned that a three-day police chaplaincy training was being offered, I immediately signed up. The twenty-four hours spent over the course of those three days proved extremely eye-opening and clarifying in ways that pushed me well beyond my comfort zone.

Five minutes after entering the conference room at a neighboring police department hosting the training, I received a glimpse of what was to come. Greeted by one of our team chaplains—the only familiar face in a sea of mostly white, mostly male attendees—I was ushered toward the breakfast offerings. Coffee, tea, and three different kinds of breakfast burritos: egg and sausage, egg and bacon, egg and chorizo. My colleague immediately understood the problem and volunteered himself to request a vegetarian option for me. Clearly, the organizers were not expecting a Muslim attendee!

I accepted my veggie burrito from an apologetic training organizer and found a seat at a table of three other police chaplains—my colleague and a husband and wife team in their late retirement age. My colleague leaned over and whispered, "By the way, this entire room is evangelical Christian." Almost as though on cue, the couple sitting across from me eyed my hijab and wordlessly handed me a small brochure: "The role of a police officer, and all government officials, is a God ordained appointment for the protection and safety of society," I read from the paper. "The Bible is God's plan in written form for humans to live happily and successfully on earth… In the Scripture, Romans 13 records that God created police…"

On the first day, we covered the chaplain's role on ride-alongs and how to offer general support. I benefited from hearing from seasoned chaplains representing different cities in our county who shared that they gently and wisely correct officers when sensing an increase in emotional energy. We also covered confidentiality, mandated reporting, and situational awareness while accompanying officers. The trainers/speakers (all male, mostly white) were retired law enforcement members who shared from their point of view as wanting chaplains to offer emotional stability to any situation, rather than serve as a liability or distraction. We reviewed radio codes, the different uniforms and when to wear them, how to address people at the department (sir and ma'am, always), and what to carry when on duty. I learned that an 82% divorce rate exists among police officers due to a variety of stressors and that the "thin blue line" informs much of law enforcement culture, which rests largely upon a foundation of brotherhood and trust. I recalled the Islamic

concept of *ummatan wasaṭan* (the middle way), as retired officers spoke about trying to keep balance in all aspects of life, from work/family to lawful/unlawful temptations.

On the second day, we discussed in detail a police chaplain's role and function when called to a scene for a death or tragic accident. We spent hours reviewing the process and procedure of coroner autopsies and death investigations, as well as covering depression and mental health obstacles for officers. It was also on the second day when I learned that police chaplaincy strongly integrates Christianity far more than does hospital chaplaincy. The police chaplains in the room identified closely with the role of pastor and admitted to struggling with separating between their pastor and chaplain title. As one chaplain said, "If an opportunity presents itself and you feel the Holy Spirit tug at you, go with it," implying that these police chaplains look for opportunities to share about Jesus with those in crisis. I felt unsurprised that only three other chaplains in the room had completed a unit of CPE, a clinical training program that encourages pluralistic approaches to faith. I remained silent, absorbing and processing the streams of new information and wondering why the chaplains in the room spoke so plainly about their agendas in front of me. I even thought about cautioning my Muslim community against accepting police chaplaincy support if the chaplain presented as Christian.

On the third day, the speakers raised awareness about the presence of excessive force out in the field, largely attributing it to the lack of opportunities for officers to debrief and unpack stacked traumatic experiences. Thus, a police chaplain may step into this space and have conversations with officers in relaxed settings to release the daily exposure to trauma. The trainers recommended speaking to officers at least two to three days after a crisis, starting with small talk and then a deeper check in. During the actual crisis, the chaplain's role includes being present to pay attention to the event and note the officers needing a check in.

At some point towards the middle of the third day, the organizers split us into small groups to discuss our core values. Among the more common words offered to describe chaplaincy values such as hope, calm, peace, empathy, wisdom, and care, a couple of groups once again incorporated an evangelical lens by sharing a core value of "preaching Christ."

By this point, I felt my frustration rise and overflow. I raised my hand. With a quivering voice, I finally spoke my discomfort and disappointment regarding the overtly evangelical approach to police chaplaincy. I expressed my concern that chaplaincy should center around care and never as a channel to convert people, especially at their most vulnerable. I shared my earlier thought about cautioning my Muslim community to accept care from a Chrisitan chaplain, knowing what I now knew about their hidden or explicit agenda.

The reactions of the police chaplains varied between some defensiveness and justification to some relief that someone had finally said something. One chaplain approached me during the break and said, smiling, "I was waiting for you to speak up!" I sighed. I wish I had told him that I was waiting for him—or anybody else—to speak up. The organizer of the training also approached me during the break and shared in hushed tones that he was actually Jewish and had always been bothered by the group's evangelism but felt outnumbered to say anything. He conceded that they really needed to revamp the

curriculum. I'm not certain how committed he felt to doing that, but I hoped that sincerity—not damage control—underscored his remarks. My chaplain colleague walked me to my car at the end of the training. We walked in silence until he said, "Thank you for what you shared. I wonder if sometimes it feels like we Christians serve people because we want them to become Christians." I nodded in agreement and explained that it feels like love and service with strings attached, rather than for the mere sake of love and service. He appeared lost in thought as we parted ways.

I revisit this memory and feel gratitude to Allah for giving me the ability to speak up despite the immense difficulty and fear. Being the only Muslim in a group of chaplains is a common occurrence for many of us, particularly in the field of law enforcement. While our perspective may prompt discussion, self-reflection, and opportunities for improvement, I wonder about putting the onus on Muslims to continually be in the position of teaching and truth-telling. The potential for moral distress, advocacy fatigue, and tokenizing Muslims within chaplaincy remains a concern.

I withdrew from police chaplaincy nearly three years after my appointment by the chief. Ironically, I had joined the team intending to alleviate some of the moral injury experienced by officers while also hoping to offer a voice that challenges the misconceptions of both police and Muslim groups within the community. While I may have touched upon the latter, I felt overburdened by my own moral injury within law enforcement, particularly following the presence of police violence against students at encampments locally and across the country. I already felt moral distress around my inability to offer my full presence and time in the role, and felt even more distanced from the team socially and emotionally post-October 2023.

Serving in law enforcement necessitates some degree of love and appreciation for America, as the two are often presented hand-in-hand, and I really struggled with my sense of belonging as an American—not that I was ever given the reassurance that I belonged anyway. I remember attending a city interfaith breakfast for the first time with two other police chaplain colleagues from the department. The minute I sat at the table, a city official approached me and asked where I was from. This often triggers me because I understand that the question stems from my wearing the hijab and nothing else (I had not even opened my mouth to speak yet!). Right after that incident, my chaplain colleague, in the spirit of getting to know me better, leaned in and said gleefully, "So, what are your thoughts on that lady who was murdered for not wearing the hee-jab in Iran?" I pretended not to understand the question and asked him to elaborate. My response took him aback, and he said, "I saw it on the news. Thank God for the USA! We are indebted to our soldiers for dying for the freedom you and I enjoy today." These moments serve as just some examples of the micro- and macro-aggressions I regularly experience in interfaith spaces. It made no difference that I, too, was dressed in full police chaplain uniform as my colleagues; in the hijab, I remained foreign and othered.

My decision to withdraw solidified after receiving a phone call from a lieutenant expressing concern about my presence at a recent local university encampment. As a dozen police departments descended upon students, faculty, and community members in full riot gear, I arrived in plainclothes wearing my police chaplain badge. On my drive over to campus, my mobile group chats accelerated in messages expressing distrust and fear of the

police present. In the car, I made the decision to wear my badge with a strong and clear intention to challenge the community's negative perception of law enforcement, understanding the risk to my relationship with the department as a result of doing so. Rather than stand alongside the officers in helmets, carrying shields and wielding batons, I roamed from students to community members checking on their palpable fear. As I approached students and community members, they would eye my badge with furrowed brows and a glare until I asked them how they were doing and offered a listening ear. Their faces would immediately lighten, and worry would replace the glare in their eyes. They could not believe I was a part of the police and asked questions about my role as chaplain, opening the channels of dialogue.

However, this decision cost me the trust of the entire department. Two days later, the lieutenant called to inform me that officers saw me "standing on the other side." I was reprimanded for wearing my badge in plainclothes. I knew then that I had shattered any potential for rapport, especially given my lack of availability to debrief and provide presence within the department. I communicated my resignation a week later and dropped off a box with my uniforms, badge, and a bouquet of flowers for the lieutenant. I do not know how my resignation was communicated to the department, but after a week, one of the two Muslim officers texted me and asked if it was true. He shared that the other Muslim at the department, a lieutenant, was informed at a closed meeting. I had come into the department quietly and left quietly. In comparison, mere weeks prior to my resignation, the chief appointed one more person to the police chaplain team, a former member of the military and a Christian pastor. I never knew if he was sworn-in or just introduced at a city council meeting, but his addition to the team was announced via a department-wide email with his picture and biography.

Law enforcement relies heavily on hierarchy, and as a volunteer chaplain with very limited time to spend making relationships, I found it very difficult to make any changes in the system. However, I carry a hope that any one-on-one conversations I shared with officers on ride-alongs and otherwise offered some value. I remember one particular shift riding with a young, fresh-from-the-academy officer who volunteered to pick me up after my original ride-along assignment canceled at the last minute. He overheard our conversation at the front desk and offered me a spot in his vehicle. Frankly, I felt surprised by his offer. He seemed like the typical white, buzz-cut, clean shaven, eager young officer, and I was the unfamiliar, hijab-clad volunteer looking to crash his otherwise personal time in the patrol car, an officer's "office on wheels."

We first shared a conversation discussing his entry into law enforcement and his perceived challenges and appreciations while checking in on a live burglary and patrolling commercial properties. A few hours into our ride-along, the young officer finally asked, "So, do you speak any other languages?" I mentally applauded his rather creative way of asking about my ethnicity. "Yes," I replied, "My first language was Arabic. How about you?" I saw him as a white male but figured I shouldn't "rob" him of the experience of being asked about his background. He paused briefly before saying, "Actually, I speak Bosnian." I turned to him incredulously. "What? You're Bosnian?" I asked, leaving behind all formalities. Now it made sense why he offered me a ride! My hijab was not all that foreign to him as I had assumed. He responded in kind, eagerly sharing about his parents

leaving Bosnia for America in the 90s. "The genocide!" I confirmed. He looked at me, genuinely surprised. "You know about the genocide?" He asked. "Of course!" I said. At that moment, all the walls between us came crashing down, and we had a lively discussion about our shared experience as children of immigrants. He shared about visiting Bosnia regularly, and we both mentioned the local Bosnian restaurant that served incredible cevapi.

Everybody who met this young officer assumed, like I did, that he was your stereotypical white American male, and this young officer blended in quite easily as a result. However, in that patrol car with me, he could be both Bosnian and a police officer without contradiction or challenge. I hope that, following our moment together, he felt empowered to embrace and share that part of his identity, even among colleagues who might otherwise "otherize" him as a "foreigner." Perhaps our connection that night will remind him that strength exists in bringing his full self into any space, even in a profession where conformity can be the norm.

As I reflect on my journey as a police chaplain, I am filled with a mix of gratitude, frustration, and clarity. Stepping into this role, I had hoped to serve as a bridge between communities, embody compassion, and challenge stereotypes—both about Muslims and about law enforcement. Yet, over time I realized that the weight of constantly navigating a space that often felt at odds with my own values took an emotional toll. The moments of connection, like the conversation with the young Bosnian officer, were profound reminders of the power of empathy and the potential for belonging. However, these instances were few and far between, often overshadowed by the reality that the system I sought to serve remained rooted in a culture that sometimes resisted change and complexity.

Through this experience, I learned that to be an effective chaplain, one must feel a sense of authentic alignment with the organization's values. When that alignment is absent, the chaplain's role shifts from being a source of support to one of internal conflict, constantly negotiating between personal integrity and institutional expectations. Ultimately, my journey reaffirmed that chaplaincy is about more than just providing comfort; it requires a deep sense of belonging and authenticity. Without these, the ability to serve wholeheartedly becomes compromised. While I chose to step back from this role, I carry forward the belief that true chaplaincy is rooted in the courage to be oneself, to challenge injustices, and to offer care that honors both one's values and the humanity of others.

# A Muslim Chaplain's Role in Government Institutions: Navigating Around Religious Freedom

Mustafa Boz*

I never anticipated that I would be working behind bars when I was in graduate school, however—at the advice of my professor Dr. Ingrid Mattson—as a master's in Islamic studies student, I applied for a part time position providing weekly services to Muslim inmates at the Connecticut Department of Corrections near Hartford Seminary, where I was studying. I found that those I served were respectful, genuine, and seeking opportunities to learn and better themselves, and that I enjoyed doing the work. I added a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy to the degree I had been working toward, in order to learn the clinical chaplaincy skills that I wanted to be able to bring into my work—skills which my colleagues from other faith traditions had gained through their own formal training. While I benefited greatly from what I was taught in this program, a significant gap in my training was the legal framework that I'd be called to operate in as a government chaplain. This became more significant when I transitioned from being a state-level corrections chaplain primarily serving Muslims to the role of staff chaplain for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

As the legal boundaries of a corrections chaplain are unique, it is critical that those working in this space understand these boundaries. In this essay, I begin by laying out a legal framework relating to the role of chaplains in correctional institutions. I will then present case studies relating specifically to the role of Muslim chaplains in relationship to the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act (RFRA), including when the requested accommodation is not aligned with the chaplain's juristic opinion. I will conclude with some best practices to take into consideration when such requests are presented to a chaplain.

## Chaplaincy Duties and Legal Requirements

Working in the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has been quite an experience for me, with having to learn about the more than twenty different religious groups represented and how to facilitate their religious needs in accordance with the Bureau of Prison's Religious Belief and Practice of Inmates policy (Lappin 2004). Quite my surprise, there are more faith traditions recognized by the BOP than I was accustomed to at the state level. This policy dictates how the First Amendment and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (US

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Congress 1993) are upheld in Federal Bureau Prisons. Chaplain Joe Pryor posits that a chaplain's understanding and knowledge of this policy is key for a successful chaplaincy career in the Bureau of Prisons (Pryor 2022, 242).

The BOP employs chaplains, similar as does the United States Armed Forces, as a means of both *fulfilling* and *staying within the bounds* of the Constitution's First Amendment. The First Amendment was written with the intention of ensuring religious freedom, especially from government interference, and grants people the freedom to practice religion. Unlike non-incarcerated citizens or civilians, those who are incarcerated or enlisted are dependent on the government to create access for their religious practices. Chaplains are thus employed by these government entities to enable that access. The Federal BOP's Chaplaincy Services' mission details the role of the chaplain in this regard:

> to accommodate the free exercise of religion by providing pastoral care to all Federal inmates and facilitate the opportunity to pursue individual religious beliefs and practices in accordance with the law, Federal regulations and Bureau of Prisons policy. Chaplains will provide religious worship, education, counseling, spiritual direction, support and crisis intervention to accommodate the diverse religious needs of inmates. When appropriate, pastoral care and subject matter expertise may be extended to staff. (Federal Bureau of Prisons 2004, 1)

It is important to note that this mission statement demonstrates that services are not restricted to the chaplain's faith group: While I am a chaplain who is Muslim, my role in the institution extends to the care of all. Longtime chaplain and former director of Chaplaincy Services for the Federal Burau of Prisons (BOP), Chaplain Pryor put it beautifully when he wrote "chaplains are called to minister to every person, inmate, or staff in their institution. It is ministry of constant presence" (Pryor 2022, 240). When an inmate has a loved one die, it does not matter if they are Jewish, Hindu, or Wiccan: If it happens during my shift, I will be responsible for verifying the death, informing the inmate, supervising a family phone call, and providing pastoral care.

As a chaplain who is Muslim, I am additionally responsible for leading *jumuʿa* (Friday congregational prayer) and the daily *ṣalāt* (ritual worship), or arranging coverage for those outside of my working hours, organizing the observances of Ramadan and Eid prayers and celebrations, providing Islamic education to Muslim inmates, and serving as a subject matter expert when institutional guidance is needed.

At the same time, the First Amendment also restricts the United States from imposing religion and religious interpretations upon people (often referred to as the "separation of church and state"). It is because of this that corrections and military chaplains require endorsement from their faith group before they can be hired by the government. In this way, the faith groups evaluate the religious competencies and capacity of an individual to serve as a representative of the faith, while the government merely evaluates their employment capacity. It is important to understand that a chaplain in a prison is serving, in part, as "the state" when we think about this role of separation between "the church and the state."

The application of the Religious Services policy requires a chaplain to be fair, equitable, just, and consistent on a daily basis, navigating the rights of the over twenty

federally recognized faith groups. At the federal level, almost without exception,[1] each of these groups receive an equal amount of programming time per week irrespective of the time differentials obligated by the religion, and each is granted one ceremonial meal annually. This means that if one group has a class that runs an hour long taught by a staff chaplain or community volunteer, the other groups also need to have an additional hour of programing time in the chapel. Unfortunately, this restricts the capacity of many staff chaplains from being able to lend the fullness of their expertise to their own faith group, but the consistency maintains an important balance in an institutional setting where tension can easily brew.

There have been times when I have been challenged by Muslim inmates who expected me to go outside of institutional policies to provide them with special treatment. One of these occasions was when, following the Eid prayer and ceremonial meal provided by the Chaplains Office, inmates attempted to hold another celebration on their own in the recreation area. The recreation staff reached out to me and asked whether or not this gathering was sanctioned by the chaplain. I remember how much I wished that my Muslim brothers could have the joyful Eid they planned, but I had to stay true to the position I was entrusted with, which requires me to consistently uphold institutional policies and ensure justice in program offerings. My denial of sanction to the recreation staff led to a lot of hurt feelings and disappointment among the Muslim inmates.

**Challenges Serving Other Faiths**

When it comes to worship services of faith traditions other than mine, I am not expected to participate or take part in the service; however, I am responsible for ensuring all of their ritual worship needs are met, even when some of these practices conflict with my own faith tradition. For example, the consumption, buying, or selling of alcohol is clearly prohibited in Islam. However, alcohol is an essential item required for the Catholic Mass.[2] As a staff chaplain, were I to argue that the prohibition of alcohol in my religion prevents me from providing it to the community priest—who is coming from outside to provide service, and for whom institutional policy prevents him from bringing the alcohol in himself—I would be violating the First Amendment rights of the inmates, as the staff chaplain position exists specifically to enable incarcerated people's free practice of religion.

One compromise that has been made when required by Muslim staff chaplains is that they are responsible for unlocking and opening the cabinet where the alcohol is stored, observing the priest's retrieval and measuring of it, and documenting the measurement in the log. While some Muslim chaplains require this, others—myself included—are

[1] Some services fundamentally require more significant time for which exemptions have been carefully made. For example, those who are adherents to Native American religion (grouped as one within the BOP) have a weekly sweat lodge service which takes about four hours, while only counting as the one-hour worship service most groups are allotted. Other times, different groups are provided additional service time based on their seasonal holidays and observances; for example, a Passover program for Jewish and Messianic inmates.
[2] See the following article on the religious use of wine: Harley Lappin, *Program Statement: Religious Beliefs and Practices*, P5360.09, Federal Bureau of Prisons, U.S Department of Justice, 2004, https://www.bop.gov/policy/progstat/5360_009.pdf.

comfortable forgoing the inconveniences and directly handing the necessary amount to the priest based on an interpretation of Islamic tradition that the prohibition of alcohol does not apply in this situation, as the chaplain is neither consuming it nor making money from it; and Islamic tradition provides flexibility and respect in this context in protecting the rights of other faith traditions and practices without imposing a limitation.[3] If one is unable to navigate one of these options, it is generally accepted that staff chaplaincy in a federal institution would not be the appropriate job.

**Subject Matter Expert**

Another key role of a Muslim corrections chaplain is serving as a consultant or subject matter expert when dealing with Muslim inmates' requests for a religious practice or article that conflicts with existing institutional policies and regulations. In this regard, Muslim chaplains often serve as cultural brokers between the prison administration and the Muslim inmates to provide meaningful guidance on how to handle such requests.

When I first began working as a corrections chaplain, I was still relatively new to this country and my knowledge of American history, and particularly the history of racism or of Black liberation movements, was very limited. I saw myself as an imam who had a responsibility to ensure the correct practice of Islam for the people in my care and I knew little about the RFRA. I remember wondering then, *why are these Muslim inmates always causing trouble and not abiding by the prison regulations*, when they would do things like insist on praying all of the ritual prayers in congregation, hemming their pants above their ankle, or having a *jumuʿa* service when they didn't meet quorum requirements in the seclusion units. A classically trained imam, I was dismissing their requests left and right on the grounds that these are not essential parts of the practice of Islam from my juristic interpretation.

I am grateful for the mentorship senior Muslim chaplains have provided me, especially longtime BOP chaplain Dr. Mukhtar Curtis, may God have mercy on him. As I came to understand how little control incarcerated individuals have over their lives, as well as how much changing external appearances can feel important for converts, I better understood how essential these things—which had seemed so trivial to me—were. They also helped me understand the role of the chaplain in relationship to "the state" when it comes to the Constitution, as well as the tremendous role that incarcerated Black American Muslims have had in shaping religious freedom for *all* Americans—largely through the fruits of their activism in the courts (Mattson 2022, xv; Kowalski 2011, 16).

I am also tremendously grateful to the BOP Central Office of Chaplaincy Services for their ongoing professional training pertaining to religious accommodation needs, which have emphasized the BOP's commitment to protect the religious rights of those in custody. I can't emphasize enough how important these trainings have been in providing me with a

[3] For example, when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was in Medina as its leader, he provided freedom and protection to religious minority groups such as Christians and Jews, to freely practice their faith. This is also demonstrated in how Muslim empires, such as the Ottomans, treated religious minorities under their rule.

proper understanding of how to navigate these requests—from both a constitutional law *and* pastoral care framework.

The advent of halal diet specific options in the BOP is an example of the importance of RFRA knowledge for chaplains serving as subject matter experts for their agency. In the past, Muslim and Jewish inmates were jointly provided Religious Diet Meals that were based on kosher diet certification requirements. Muslim inmates challenged the BOP on the basis that kosher requirements are not the same as halal ones. In doing so, they pointed out some important differences between the two and requested that they should be provided with halal certified specific foods (Ajaj v. Federal Bureau of Prisons). Several Muslim chaplains were called to provide guidance to the Central Office Chaplaincy Services on halal requirements and, particularly, their manifestation outside of a prison context in Muslim lived experience.

We explained the diversity of opinions among Muslims pertaining to halal requirements and the major differences between halal and kosher dietary rules. For example, many American Muslims—including the majority of inmates in the institution where I was serving—consider consuming non-*ẓabīḥa*[4] (a term denoting meat slaughtered in accordance with halal rules) certified beef and chicken permissible based on *fatwā*s (Islamic non-binding rulings) of scholars such as Imam Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Central Mosque, n.d.) and Ibn al-Uthaymin (Islam Question & Answer 2023). These *fatwā*s are based on the verse in the Qurʾān which states: "This day [all] good foods have been made lawful, and the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them" (Qurʾān 5:5). Additionally, they reference the narration by ʿĀʾisha (may Allah be pleased with her) that "some people said: 'O Messenger of Allah, some people bring meat to us, and we do not know whether they mentioned the name of Allah over it or not.' The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) said: 'Mention the name of Allah over it and eat'" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2057).

However, many other American Muslims hold that *ẓabīḥa* guidelines should be followed in the consumption of beef and chicken on a daily basis. Therefore, kosher meat would not be considered halal because the name of Allah has to be said specifically by a Muslim as a condition for *ẓabīḥa* certification (Riaz and Chaudry 2004). Certified poultry sold domestically and internationally is commonly machine slaughtered with the name of Allah given as the machine is turned on, rather than as each animal is slaughtered, given the speed at which the machines move. The opinion that this is an acceptable method of fulfilling *ẓabīḥa* requirements is held by the Jeddah Fiqh Academy and overwhelmingly by other Muslim scholars around the world.[5]

A subset of the second group, however, including the inmate bringing the request, rejects the notion that machine slaughter is acceptable. This opinion is held by contemporary scholar Mufti Taqi Uthmani (Ibn Adam, n.d.) and others on the basis of the Qurʾānic verse: "And do not eat of that upon which the name of Allah has not been

[4] See more details on the *ẓabīḥa* process: Mian N. Riaz and Muhammad M. Chaudry, *Halal Food Production* (CRC Press, 2004), available at: http://www.al-rida.net/attachments/040_halal.pdf.

[5] See an extended discussion on the permissibility of mechanical slaughtering: Mufti Ikram ul Haq, *The Fiqh of mechanical slaughter: A research for AMJA's 9th Annual Imam's Conference 2012* (Los Angelos: AMJA, 2012). https://www.amjaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2012-8-slaugheter.pdf.

mentioned" (Qurʾān 6:121). They hold that slaughter must be performed by hand to meet the *ẓabīḥa* requirement of alleviating distress for the animals *and* that the name of Allah must be said over each animal (Chaudry et al. 2000). While this is a minority opinion not reflective of mainstream practice, nor the opinion that I personally follow, for some—including the inmate—it is a sincerely held religious belief. Notably, it is also a more expensive and logistically complicated request for the BOP to facilitate. While it would have been convenient for the BOP, and aligned with my own interpretation of halal regulations, to have advocated for the acceptance of machine slaughter or kosher certified meat, it would have been a violation of this inmates' religious freedom by "the state."

As a result of the approach of fully demonstrating the diversity of normative Muslim views on the topic beyond my own position in order to be RFRA compliant, the BOP was able to avoid a lawsuit being brought against it. Additionally, while it was not a factor in my consideration and rather a benefit I only recognized subsequently, it also opened up a significant new market for halal food sales within BOP facilities, as well as helped drive the development of more humane slaughter practices.

When accommodation requests cannot be handled at an institutional level for safety or security reasons, or because a required mechanism is absent, they will be referred to a regional office, and if necessary, to the Central Office of Chaplaincy Services. When the Muslim inmate requested the halal diet, there were no policies at the institutional level to facilitate the request. Eventually, the request worked its way up to the Central Office level. Ultimately the BOP, in consultation with Muslim chaplains and other departments, concluded that denying the request would substantially burden the Muslim inmate's free exercise of his religion under the RFRA law. Therefore, they decided to provide a halal diet option based on a strict *ẓabīḥa* hand slaughtering process, and this version of a halal diet was made available throughout all BOP institutions.

Another example of balancing an individual chaplain's juristic opinion with the sincerely held beliefs of an inmate arose around trying to decide which method should be used to determine the Ramadan timings used by the BOP: calculation or moon sighting; and if the latter, global or local? The implications are significant due to the logistics around meal scheduling, staffing needs (as all meals must be supervised), the institutional schedule related to when inmates can move between spaces, and a list provision of who is allowed these special movement and meal privileges. In this regard, requiring the calculation method nationally would be a significantly easier pathway, as it allows for more concrete advanced preparation and is considered a valid approach by many Islamic scholars.

However, many Muslims, especially among those who are incarcerated, follow the moon sighting juristic opinion. Keeping the RFRA in consideration, a decision was made by the Central Office in consultation with Muslim chaplains, to provide an advanced memo containing projected dates for planning purposes and then, once a global moon sighting has been declared by a significant *fiqh* (Islamic juridical) council, an additional communication is sent to institutions to provide them with notification to commence Ramadan programming.

I believe it is important for a Muslim chaplain, when called to serve in such a capacity, to navigate the issue through the lenses of religious freedom and practice, the RFRA, and respect to the diversity of Muslim scholarly interpretation, rather than imposing

one's own opinion or a mainstream Muslim interpretation of Islam. One theme that comes up when looking at the arc of such cases is that enabling the most restrictive Islamic interpretation has often opened space for flexibility for incarcerated Muslims to have more freedom in their religious practices, while also benefiting the BOP by avoiding additional legal suits. While perhaps not always the case, it is worth taking into consideration as one considers *fiqh* positions: What seems the easiest may end up being harder, and what at first seems difficult to accommodate may lead to more ease.

The RFRA prohibits any government agency or official from substantially burdening a person's exercise of religion "even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability" except that the agency concludes that "the application of the burden to the person" (1) furthers compelling governmental interest; and (2) it is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest (US Congress 1993). In facing and dealing with new and unfamiliar religious requests, chaplains are taught during training that we must handle such requests on a case-by-case basis and we should ask a number of questions, while working with other departments in the institution (e.g., custody, food services). Is this request a sincerely held religious belief or practice by the inmate? Is it required by his/her faith tradition or is it rooted and has basis in his/her faith tradition? Is it a fringe opinion in his/her tradition? Is there a compelling institutional interest to deny or put a limit to such a request? Is this request going to impact safety, security, and the orderly running of the institution? If the agency decides to deny such a request, will this place a substantial burden on the practice of the inmate's religion? Can there be a compromise, and can the agency explore alternatives to be able to accommodate with a less restrictive option?

## Conclusion

Muslim chaplains have many roles in corrections chaplaincy, including providing pastoral care to all inmates regardless of religion, ensuring that religious services are provided for all recognized faiths, and lending meaningful and non-judgmental guidance when called to serve as subject matter experts for accommodation requests. This last responsibility can be especially challenging when requests do not conform with a chaplain's own interpretation, are not aligned with mainstream Muslim practice and belief, or place a burden on the institution. Despite the challenges, facilitating these requests is often required of us given the role that we fill, and they also can create new opportunities for humane treatment of those behind bars and a more diverse and holistic protection of free expression of religion and faith. When Chaplain Pryor discusses this fundamental role of the chaplain in relation to the First Amendment of the Constitution that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (US Constitution, amend. 1) in the prison setting, he sagely writes: "In protecting the religious freedom of others, chaplains realize they are protecting their own at the same time" (Pryor 2022, 241).

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# Board Certification: Its Requirements, Process, and Value - The Personal Experience of a Muslim Chaplain

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The Muslim population in the United States is growing steadily. According to estimates by the US Religion Census, the number of Muslims in the US reached approximately 4.45 million in 2020, comprising around 1.34% of the total population. By 2040, Muslims are projected to become the second-largest religious group in the country (Mohamed 2018). This demographic shift is likely to correspond with an increase in Muslim patients in US hospitals, underscoring the need for more well-trained Muslim chaplains. As highlighted by Abdulbaseer et al. in their 2024 national survey of Muslim patients' religious and spiritual needs in US hospitals (*Journal of General Internal Medicine*), chaplaincy remains one of the most consistently unmet needs for Muslim patients in clinical settings.

Chaplaincy can be an especially meaningful and spiritually resonant vocation for Muslims. It aligns closely with the Sunna of the Prophet ﷺ, who emphasized the virtue of visiting and comforting the sick, as described in a well-known *ḥadīth qudsī*.[1] Professional chaplaincy also offers a path to fulfill the communal obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) of caring for the ill and vulnerable.

Despite the growing demand, there is a notable discrepancy between the number of individuals who identify as Muslim chaplains and those who have achieved board certification. The Association of Muslim Chaplains reports that, while many Muslim chaplains hold certificates in traditional Islamic sciences, only six were board certified in 2019 (Association of Muslim Chaplains, n.d.). This shortfall underscores the critical need for structured pathways toward professional certification in Muslim chaplaincy.

For those pursuing chaplaincy as a profession or spiritual calling, Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is an essential step. More than a training program, CPE—when approached with sincere *niyya* (intention)—can itself become a form of spiritual practice. It invites deep self-reflection, the cultivation of humility, and meaningful engagement with

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[1] See *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2569.

those whose spiritual lives may differ from one's own. These practices are deeply aligned with Islamic spiritual values, particularly those emphasized in the Qurʾān.

Reflection (*tafakkur*), contemplation (*tadabbur*), and the use of reason (*ʿaql*) are all recognized in Islamic tradition as paths to nearness with Allah. In Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, verse 13, Allah says:

> O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.

This Qurʾānic invitation to learn from human diversity reflects the very essence of CPE, which encourages caregivers to encounter difference with openness and curiosity rather than judgment. In this way, Islamic ideals and the ethos of professional chaplaincy are not only compatible—they are mutually reinforcing.

## Importance of Board Certification

Board certification is an important step for Muslim chaplains in the United States; one that elevates both the quality of spiritual care offered and the visibility of chaplaincy as a profession across various sectors, including healthcare, education, the military, corrections, and emergency services. While board certification is encouraged across all of these settings, this article will focus specifically on healthcare chaplaincy, which reflects the professional experience of the authors.

At the heart of the certification journey is Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a core requirement that prepares chaplains to serve people of all backgrounds with compassion, integrity, and cultural humility. For Muslim chaplains, CPE offers a powerful opportunity to bring deep theological knowledge into a clinical context, meeting the needs of patients, staff, and institutions while upholding the highest standards of professional care.

The certification process also offers something more personal: a chance to turn inward. For this piece's authors, it invited a deeper exploration of our own practical theology and highlighted areas where we wanted to grow, not just as a chaplain but as a person. This kind of inner work is not a side note to chaplaincy; it is its beating heart. When we are grounded in our own formation, we are better equipped to be fully present with others in theirs.

## The Role of CPE

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), a cornerstone of chaplaincy formation, offers far more than the application of practical skills. It is, at its core, a refining process, one that deepens a chaplain's capacity for spiritual care through lived experience, vulnerability, and thoughtful reflection. For many, it becomes a space of transformation, where theory and theology are tested and reshaped by real encounters with suffering, healing, and the unknown.

A deeply resonant element of CPE for Muslim chaplains is its emphasis on *muḥāsaba*: intentional self-examination. Whether in group settings or one-on-one

supervision, this practice invites chaplains to reflect honestly on their emotional responses, internal assumptions, and spiritual grounding. It prepares us to walk alongside others through moments of spiritual turbulence, doubt, and awakening—not by offering answers, but by cultivating the inner stillness and presence needed to hold space with sincerity and compassion.

Through this journey, chaplains learn to draw from both disciplined praxis and intuitive awareness, qualities the Islamic tradition refers to as *ḥuḍūr* (presence of heart) and *sukūn* (tranquility). These states aren't simply acquired; they are nurtured through deep listening, humility, and the willingness to be shaped by what we encounter in the sacred space between caregiver and care recipient.

In recent years, the expansion of online CPE programs[2] has helped make this formative experience more accessible to students who may not live near traditional training centers. While CPE lays the foundation, true growth as a chaplain continues well beyond the program's end. That said, the immersive nature of CPE can offer invaluable insight into one's readiness or unreadiness for the emotional and spiritual demands of professional chaplaincy.

For Muslims considering CPE, enter with sincerity and openness. Let your Islam—not just your knowledge of it, but the way it lives in you—inform your presence and guide your care. When you show up authentically, not only do you deepen your own experience, but you also enrich the learning environment for your peers and educators. Your voice, your questions, your context: they matter, and they are needed.

## Competencies for Board Certification

There are several certifying bodies in the US, some of which are faith specific. An organization that is not faith specific is the Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc. (BCCI),[3] an affiliate of the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC). Its requirements and process are used for this article.

The competencies required by the BCCI are comprehensive, ensuring that certified chaplains are fully prepared for their future responsibilities. These skills include, among others, integrating personal spirituality with a theory of spiritual care and addressing skills and practice connected to human psychology and ethics. All certified chaplains are expected to have a high level of self-awareness; be able to acknowledge their own limitations, strengths, and biases; and maintain personal spiritual practices for their own well-being. Respect, openness, and non-judgmental care are paramount to this role.

While these competencies are robust, there is an ongoing discussion about the specific other competencies that may be particularly relevant or necessary for Muslim chaplains. For instance, integrating Islamic theological education into the CPE framework and identifying the additional skills required to address Muslim patients' unique spiritual

[2] For example, the Institute for Clinical Pastoral Training provides hybrid CPE programs, which include in-person elements combined with online instruction. See https://www.icpt.edu/index.html.
[3] See https://www.apchaplains.org/bcci-site/.

needs are areas of interest. These discussions could guide the further development of this field, another great benefit to having more Muslim chaplains becoming certified.

## The Process

The rigorous board certification process is designed to ensure that chaplains are well-prepared for the weighty responsibilities their role entails. Full certification with BCCI calls for at least a master's degree in a field related to chaplaincy, four units of CPE, 2,000 hours of post-CPE chaplaincy work experience (paid or voluntary), and mastery of twenty-nine competencies demonstrated in writing or during an interview.

Applicants submit clinical contact narratives based on real-life professional experiences, essays addressing each competency, letters of recommendation, a letter of endorsement from their faith group, and a comprehensive record of completed education and experience. An education equivalency process helps chaplains who attained their education outside of academia or a seminary. This involves compiling religious education done under a scholar or qualified imam and equating those experiences to up to 72 hours of graduate credits. The certification process culminates in an interview that thoroughly evaluates the chaplain's understanding and application of these competencies.

Although this process may seem daunting, it is proportionate to the critical nature of a chaplain's work. As chaplains are entrusted with their patients' most intimate moments during their most vulnerable times, spiritual care practitioners must have a clear understanding of their boundaries to prevent harm and promote well-being. This is directly aligned with the foundational Islamic ethic of enjoining good (*amr bi-l-maʿrūf*) and forbidding wrong (*nahīʿan al-munkar*). These ethical considerations are vital because chaplains are in positions of pastoral authority, where the potential for spiritual abuse (misusing a person's spiritual beliefs in a way that scares, manipulates, or tries to control someone) is a real risk. Without the rigorous training and self-awareness that derive from the certification process, chaplains could inadvertently cause harm by judging vulnerable persons, invalidating their emotions or experiences, or invoking inappropriate *fatwā*s. Therefore, certification is not merely a credential, but a safeguard to ensure compassionate and ethically sound care.

## The Value of Board Certified Chaplains

The role of healthcare chaplains in the US has evolved significantly. They were once primarily focused on providing religious services at the margins of healthcare teams. Now they are viewed differently. A recent consensus statement[4] recognizes the "unique and essential" role of healthcare chaplains and their integration in the healthcare team as spiritual care specialists who support and advocate for patients, families, caregivers, and staff regardless of their religious or spiritual identity. The statement, developed by a panel including one of this article's authors, "describes what fully trained professional chaplains

[4] See Handzo et al., 2023, "A Statement on the Role and Qualifications of Health Care Chaplains for Research and Quality," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 65, no. 6 (June): e745–e755, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2023.01.026.

can, and are trained to, contribute to health care institutions and those they serve" (Handzo et al. 2023).

Board certification plays a key role in defining and standardizing these contributions. It ensures that chaplains have mastered a set of competencies, ranging from spiritual assessment and ethical reflection to interfaith engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration. This process reinforces the importance of practical skill alongside theoretical education, ensuring that chaplains are equipped to listen deeply and respond meaningfully to the complex spiritual needs of patients. While education lays the foundation, it is often the attentive presence of a chaplain—the ability to bear witness to suffering and meaning-making—that has the most profound impact on patients, families, and the teams who support them.

This is particularly significant for Muslim patients, whose experience of illness is often shaped by theological and ethical frameworks rooted in Islamic tradition. The Qurʾānic assurance that "with hardship comes ease" (Qurʾān 94:6) and the prophetic emphasis on visiting and caring for the sick (for example, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2199) reflect a deep spiritual engagement with suffering. Chaplains trained in this context can offer support that affirms not only the emotional and psychological dimensions of illness, but also its spiritual and existential meaning. They help patients draw upon their faith in moments of vulnerability, offering compassionate presence grounded in *raḥma* (mercy), *iḥsān* (excellence), and *tawakkul* (reliance on God).

In the Islamic ethical tradition, the act of caring for the sick is a *farḍ kifāya*—a communal obligation (Al-Qaradawi 1999). Chaplains fulfill this obligation by ensuring that spiritual care goes beyond ritual and is integrated into the holistic delivery of care. Certified chaplains participate in clinical rounds, develop spiritual care plans, educate staff about cultural and religious practices, and offer support to caregivers experiencing burnout or moral distress (Cadge and Rambo 2022). They help build a more just and compassionate healthcare environment, where the dignity (*karāma*) of every individual is honored.

By focusing on spiritual assessments, board certified chaplains also enhance the quality of patient-centered care, ensuring that the patient's voice is heard and respected throughout the decision-making process. In many cases, discussions about a patient's needs occur primarily between medical teams and family members, without fully engaging the patient themselves. Yet it is often the patient who can best articulate their spiritual priorities and concerns. Certified chaplains are trained to attend to this inner life, helping foster an open, informed, and cooperative environment. In doing so, they support more ethical and spiritually responsive clinical outcomes—outcomes that align with the broader goals of both medicine and Islamic ethics.

For Muslim communities in the United States, the advancement of board certified Muslim chaplains is not only a matter of representation; it is a step toward fulfilling our collective responsibility to ensure that healthcare is delivered with justice (*ʿadl*), compassion, and integrity. As the healthcare system continues to recognize the role of spirituality in healing, investing in the training, certification, and institutional integration of Muslim chaplains remains essential to holistic and dignified care.

**Examples Demonstrating the Importance of Competencies**

The following stories, drawn from the firsthand experience of one of this article's authors, illustrate how the competencies required for board certification manifest in practice. They highlight the nuanced ways spiritual care enhances patient-centered outcomes, alleviates emotional burdens, and upholds human dignity within healthcare settings.

One memorable encounter involved Mary, a 13-year-old girl diagnosed with a leg tumor. During her hospital stay, Mary was withdrawn: keeping her room dark, covering her head, and immersing herself in her phone. The medical team, concerned about her disengagement, considered a psychiatric consult. However, the nurse manager suggested a spiritual care assessment first.

Upon meeting Mary, I introduced myself and invited her to share about herself. Through attentive listening, she revealed her confusion over the medical information provided and the pressure she felt from her single working mother to comprehend and relay details from medical rounds. Recognizing the need for family involvement, I proposed that the medical team include Mary's mother via speakerphone during rounds, thereby reducing the communication burden on Mary and fostering a collaborative care environment.[5]

Addressing the room's darkness, Mary expressed discomfort about being visible from the adjacent building, especially given her mobility challenges. Advocating for her privacy and emotional comfort, I arranged for her to be moved to a room without external visibility, demonstrating respect for her personal boundaries and environmental sensitivities.[6] When asked about any additional comforts, Mary wished for a milkshake, cheeseburger, and fries—simple pleasures reminiscent of her life outside the hospital. After confirming dietary appropriateness, I fulfilled her request, contributing to her overall well-being.[7] These interventions, rooted in establishing and nurturing a professional spiritual care relationship, led to Mary becoming more engaged and upbeat during her stay.

Another poignant experience involved Omar, a 14-year-old boy from Yemen with a significant neck tumor. His parents had sought treatment globally, only to be informed at our hospital that surgical removal posed life-threatening risks. This prognosis deeply affected his family, particularly his father, who had to return to Yemen, leaving Omar and his mother with limited support in the US.

During our interactions, Omar and I discussed various topics, from friendships to soccer, always concluding with *duʿāʾ* (supplication). Over time, he confided his awareness of his impending death and his desire to recite the *shahāda* (bearing witness to Allah's Oneness) before passing, ensuring his entry into paradise. His primary concern, however, was for his mother's spiritual well-being, fearing her faith might crumble after his death.

[5] **PPS2:** Provide effective spiritual support that contributes to the well-being of care recipients, including patients (or the relevant analogue in a non-healthcare setting), their families/friends, and staff (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

[6] **PPS3:** Provide spiritual care that respects diversity, relative to differences in race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, etc. (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

[7] **PPS1:** Establish, deepen, and conclude professional spiritual care relationships with sensitivity, openness, and respect (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

In response, I developed a spiritual care plan that incorporated Omar's theological reflections and addressed his concerns.[8] Noticing that his mother often left the room during our prayers, I began keeping the door open, creating an inviting atmosphere for her participation. Gradually, she joined our sessions, culminating in her active involvement in our *duʿāʾ*, which brought immense peace to Omar.[9] Omar passed away shortly after, but not before experiencing spiritual healing. A month later, his mother contacted me from Yemen, expressing gratitude and sharing that she had regained her faith despite the profound loss, underscoring the holistic impact of compassionate spiritual care.

Lastly, I encountered Maria, an elderly woman visibly distressed after being informed by her doctor that she had suffered a cardiac arrest. She misunderstood this to mean she had been legally arrested, an experience foreign to her. Utilizing my role as a chaplain, I clarified that the term referred to a heart attack, not a legal matter. Relieved, Maria requested a prayer, highlighting the chaplain's role in bridging communication gaps between medical professionals and patients, ensuring they feel understood and supported throughout their healthcare journey.[10]

## Conclusion

These stories demonstrate how the competencies cultivated through CPE—and affirmed through board certification—do more than attest to a chaplain's qualifications. They shape chaplains into spiritually grounded, emotionally attuned, and professionally prepared caregivers. This formation equips chaplains to provide the highest standard of care, rooted in compassion, ethics, and cultural sensitivity. Without such preparation, chaplains may lack the tools to navigate the diverse and complex needs of those they serve, risking not only misunderstanding but also the possibility of spiritual harm.

Board certification is not merely a credential. It is a trust (*amāna*) that ensures our communities receive care that is safe, thoughtful, and dignified. It is a safeguard for quality, an investment in excellence, and a testament to our collective responsibility to honor the spiritual dimension of healing.

As more Muslim chaplains pursue board certification, we pray that their voices, perspectives, and lived faith will shape the field of chaplaincy in profound and lasting ways. May the depth of our tradition enrich chaplaincy education and may the presence of certified Muslim chaplains help meet the growing needs of our *umma* across the country.

[8] **ITP1:** Articulate an approach to spiritual care rooted in one's spiritual tradition and integrated with a theory of spiritual care (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

[9] **PPS9:** Facilitate group processes in the provision of spiritual care (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

[10] **PPS2:** Provide effective spiritual support that contributes to the well-being of care recipients, including patients (or the relevant analogue in a non-healthcare setting), their families/friends, and staff (Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. 2023).

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# The Development of Islamic Chaplaincy in the United States: An Interview with Dr. Jimmy Jones

Mona Islam*

## Introduction

The field of Islamic chaplaincy in the United States has evolved significantly over the last few decades, growing from a largely informal and unrecognized service to a respected and essential profession in which Muslim chaplains have become active in hospitals, military services, prisons, and other institutions. From its early days in the 1970s until the present, individuals like Dr. James "Jimmy" Jones have played a central role in shaping this field. In this article, we delve into his experiences and insights on its development, the role of American Muslim seminaries, and the challenges faced by chaplains.

Dr. Jones became involved in Islamic chaplaincy during the 1970s as a volunteer chaplain and is now executive vice president of The Islamic Seminary of America (TISA). Through his work and reflections, he has watched Islamic chaplaincy programs evolve and receive growing recognition within the broader American society. This interview highlights his personal journey, the obstacles faced in professionalizing chaplaincy, the future of training Muslim chaplains, and his perspective on the importance of establishing Muslim-led institutions for leadership training.

### *The Role and History of American Muslim Seminaries*

Within our conversation, Dr. Jones explained that Muslim chaplaincy was influenced by early pioneers such as the Nation of Islam and shaped by the growth of American Muslim seminaries, which began to emerge in the late 20th century. These seminaries played a critical role in developing a systematic approach to Islamic thought and practice for American Muslims. Dr. Jones emphasizes that while chaplaincy itself was not always viewed as a distinct profession, this attitude has changed as the Islamic community's growing need for trained leaders became increasingly apparent.

### *Chaplaincy Programs*

As the demand for Muslim chaplains grew, the focus turned to providing effective leadership training. Dr. Jones points out a critical gap: "I was puzzled why, at one point, Christian institutions like Hartford Seminary were the primary trainers of Muslim chaplains. This seemed odd to me." In 2010, Hartford Seminary, a Christian institution,

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began offering a Muslim chaplaincy program, which Dr. Jones saw as both an opportunity and a challenge. While he acknowledged that Hartford's initiative helped fill the educational gap for Muslims within this field, he also noted: "We need to train our own leaders, not rely on institutions that are rooted in other faith traditions." This realization drove him and others to concentrate on designing robust training programs within the Muslim community created by Muslims for Muslims.

### *The Islamic Seminary of America*

The need for Muslim-led chaplaincy training programs has led to the establishment of institutions like The Islamic Seminary of America (TISA), which aims to provide culturally relevant education for future Muslim leaders. However, this journey initially faced resistance. Dr. Jones recalls: "When we opened The Islamic Seminary of America, people were saying, 'You shouldn't study at an Islamic seminary in America [for chaplaincy]. You should go to a non-Muslim institution.'" At TISA, Dr. Jones has worked to develop a curriculum that combines Islamic theology with practical skills in counseling, ethics, and leadership. Despite the significant progress made in training, several challenges remain, among them—rather surprisingly—a lack of support from the community.

## Interview with Dr. Jones

*Conducted by Dr. Mona Islam on January 16, 2025*

*Dr. Islam:*
I would like to start by asking if you can provide a brief introduction about yourself, a little bit of background for those who are not familiar with you.

*Dr. Jones:*
I got into chaplaincy in an odd way. My graduate schools were Christian seminaries: I went to Yale Divinity School for a Master of Arts in Religion and to what was then Hartford Seminary for a Doctor of Ministry. So, I was running into chaplains in that context. The whole notion of chaplains in communal spaces was only beginning to emerge outside of prisons. I would add that concurrently, the Nation of Islam had been spearheading efforts in prisons, particularly with African American Muslims. In a sense, they were the community's pioneer chaplains, even though their beliefs are very different from those of orthodox Sunni Islam. The reality is that a lot of our current ability to work in the prison system is really based on the work that they did early on.

So, it's two points that led me to chaplaincy. One: I heard about chaplaincy. Of course, I heard about chaplains growing up, but they were Christian and sometimes Jewish chaplains. And then two: The Nation of Islam—which became the World Community of Islam in the West, and then the Community of Warith Deen Mohammed—were pioneers in this respect. I became Muslim, *al-ḥamdu lillāh*, in 1979. At that time, the Nation of Islam had transitioned, under Warith Deen Mohammed's leadership, to a more Sunni version of Islam. One of my first jobs as a new convert was to go into the New Haven Correctional Facility as a chaplain. The only word they had for it in the facility at that time was "volunteer chaplain," so that's how I got the title. Even though I knew very little about

Islam, it made me study harder because incarcerated people often do a lot of studying during their time.

I've been wearing this title for over 40 years. I worked at the New Haven Correctional Facility from 1979 until just before COVID broke out in 2019, *al-ḥamdu lillāh*. So that's my background.

I would add that now I do community chaplaincy, primarily attached to Masjid al-Islam in New Haven. I focus on premarital and family pastoral advice (which is not clinical counseling but more pastoral advising) and when people die, helping connect the bereaved with the necessary people for advice. I do this semi-regularly, and also advise leadership on what Christians would call "pastoral issues." So, chaplaincy through serendipity became a big part of my life, *mā shā Allāh*.

*Dr. Islam:*
*Jazāk Allāhu khayr*. I was going to ask you, how did you become interested in chaplaincy? I feel like you covered some of that. Is there anything you want to add?

*Dr. Jones:*
Yes, I became interested in chaplaincy through the community of Warith Deen Mohammed. I did that for a long time. But honestly, I didn't think of it as a "profession," you know? You just go and do it. I started thinking of it as a profession only around 2010 or 2011, when my alma mater, Hartford Seminary, started doing a Muslim chaplaincy program. That was something I had never really thought of before. However, I thought it was odd that a Christian seminary would be training Muslim chaplains. It just sounded odd to me. I thought about it like if you and I decided to start a training program for Jewish chaplains—the outcry you would get from the Jewish community would be huge.

It's just strange to me that a Christian institution was producing most of our chaplains. That's why I got more invested. This isn't a criticism of Hartford Seminary, but a criticism of the Muslim community. We should want to train our own leadership rather than have it primarily trained by other faith traditions.

When we opened The Islamic Seminary of America, people were saying, "Oh, you shouldn't study at an Islamic seminary in America. You should go to a non-Muslim institution." People were literally saying this publicly, including academics. So, my interest peaked when I realized that we, as a community, weren't very interested in training our own leaders. That's why I got involved with a group of people to revive the Association of Muslim Chaplains. *Al-ḥamdu lillāh*, we did that, and it's much stronger as an institution now.

Additionally, we started running training programs for chaplains and imams every year from 2010 to 2019, until COVID hit. The goal was to think about two things: What kind of standards should there be for chaplaincy and imam training, and what kind of institutions should we develop?

So, my professional interest in chaplaincy really grew when my alma mater started the first accredited Muslim chaplain training programs. But I still thought it was odd that we didn't have our own institutions for this.

*Dr. Islam:*
I'm curious—did you ever have a chance to find out what they were teaching in their program?

*Dr. Jones:*
Oh yeah, I did. Many Christian seminaries and other institutions train people from other faith traditions. The difference is that the latter have the choice of either going to a non-home-based institution or one led by people of their own faith [for their CPE training]. But when someone outside the faith tradition teaches people of another tradition, the approach is different. For instance, if we taught Jews, our interest in doing so would be very different. The key difference is that we, as an institution, are very concerned with maintaining Islam in America. I don't think that's the primary goal of Hartford Seminary or Union Theological Seminary. They also have an inter-religious program with a focus on Islam, but it's just a different ethos.

It's a very different thing when the institution is Muslim, with Muslim faculty and policies made by Muslims, as that impacts what people learn. Institutions like Zaytuna, The Islamic Seminary of America, and American Islamic College function differently from Christian-based institutions. I'm not criticizing those Christian institutions. I'm just saying that their approach is different. This is just a statement of fact.

And the fact is that the program within a non-Muslim institution feels different and functions differently in general than in a freestanding Muslim institution. And there are other examples. Bayan, for instance, is inside the Chicago Theological Seminary. I imagine it would function very differently if its graduate school were not a part of the Chicago Theological Seminary. Again, this is not a criticism, but a statement of fact. Earlier in life, I was an organizational consultant, and so I think in organizational terms and about organizational culture. One way of illustrating the difference among Hartford and Bayan and Zaytuna is that the institution's core is developed and run by Muslims, and this makes all the difference in the world in terms of what one learns. Not a criticism. I have to say this a thousand times simply because people see it as such. I'm by-and-large criticizing the Muslims because, unfortunately, the Muslim community in North America has not felt the urgency that I think we should about training our own leaders, both imams and chaplains. A young Jewish or Christian person can go from kindergarten to a PhD in their own faith institutions. I see my statement as a plea to the community to take the notion of training our leadership for the next generation much more seriously than we do now, because what happens is that often we're building and developing some excellent K through 12 schools, and then youngsters go off to a [non-Muslim] four-year institution.

I spent 30 years teaching at an undergraduate institution. I want to tell you that a lot of the work can be easily undone by one freshman semester at a non-Muslim institution because of the value system. And we see this in the current political world, as the so-called "woke culture" is a real thing on college campuses. And much of its values don't coincide with those of Islam.

My point here is that as Muslims, we need to understand that if we're serious about rooting ourselves in this place and in this time, we ought to be about the business of making sure that we have substantial higher education institutions. I offer Texas Christian

University as an example. This university is part of the Higher Learning Commission, which is part of something called, I believe, the Churches of Christ, which has thousands of students. I've forgotten the exact number. In seventeen institutions, they have seven seminaries, right? And they're about 10% of the Muslim population, about 350,000 people. We have nothing near what they have. As a community, they understand the importance of training their own leadership, particularly in chaplaincy, I think because chaplains usually function in interfaith spaces. And so, aside from the service they're giving, Muslim chaplains are often representing Islam to the wider world. I think it's important for us to train our own.

Let me finish this little piece by saying this: I am not saying that all chaplains should be trained by Muslim institutions, but that our community should primarily train ourselves. I have no problem with people who want to go someplace else and get a degree; however, it's not something I would do. I didn't really have a choice when I was going to graduate school. But those who choose to do this should understand that it is extremely important for those institutions who are training our leadership to have a model of what we think our leadership ought to be. They need institutions like the American Islamic College, TISA, and Zaytuna, that are producing knowledge that helps the broader world and produces leaders who understand what we think a Muslim leader or chaplain should be.

*Dr. Islam:*
Yeah, I agree, especially about the point where you said it's not a criticism. I think Muslims get really sensitive when they hear anything that's even a little bit critical or they think is a criticism, but it's not. We have to be critical thinkers and understand all that.

So, I want to ask you: What do you feel is the connection between TISA and chaplaincy? If you can offer your thoughts about that?

*Dr. Jones:*
When we saw that Hartford Seminary was the primary trainer of Muslim chaplains, we said, "Wow, we can't let this be." Again, I keep saying it's not a criticism of Hartford Seminary, but a criticism of us. We ought to be wanting to provide the leadership for training our own chaplains.

Thus, we started the Annual Shura at Yale University. In this Annual Shura, we focused on three things: (1) developing professional Islamic chaplaincy primarily through reviving the Association of Muslim Chaplains; (2) setting standards, which will also impact standards for imams—this eventually became the Muslim Endorsement Council; first, it was the Muslim Endorsement Council of Connecticut, and then the national Muslim Endorsement Council—and (3) establishing our own seminary.

Not for not one moment from roughly 2010 to 2017 did I ever think that I would be running TISA, because I thought that such a person should have a stronger background in the religious and Islamic sciences than I do. I'm not saying that they should be a deep, deep scholar, but I mean, I'm still a bit of a convert in my view. I've been a Muslim for a long time, but I haven't put in the time like Zaid Shakir, Abdul Hakim Jackson, or even Ubaydullah Evans have. These converts have put in the time, deep diving into the faith far more than I have.

One day I just woke up and found myself in charge as the executive vice president. But the point is that it's part of those three things that I thought and we thought we should do: (1) professionalize our leadership, chaplaincy, and imams; (2) set standards for our chaplains and imams; and (3) have our own seminary, our own training institute. And so that's how I got from chaplaincy into TISA.

*Dr. Islam:*
What issues do you deal with as a chaplain?

*Dr. Jones:*
First of all, the very notion of chaplaincy—even though the concept comes from Christianity and we don't have it expressed in that same way—to be a servant leader is extremely important in this land. The notion of what they call pastoral counseling, advising people (*naṣīḥa*) is crucial.

And so, in a sense, what people are calling chaplaincy, to me, largely comes right out of our beloved Prophet's (peace be upon him) Sunna. One is to give. Much of what I do is to try to give goodness. Much of what our beloved Prophet did was give good advice. So many of my interactions with people are very brief, like walking into and leaving the masjid, after *jumuʿa* a brief phone call, and sometimes they ask me questions. For instance, one day I got a call from a mentee asking me about organ donation. I replied: "I'm not qualified to talk about this. I'm neither a medical professional nor have deep enough knowledge in Islam. And I'm not a *muftī*." So I called somebody who was.

What I often do, in my capacity as a chaplain, is connect people to other people. In this case, I connected him with Dr. Aasim Padela, a medical doctor—our keynote speaker at our TISA graduation ceremony on May 17—who is almost single-handedly establishing Islamic bioethics based on deep, deep roots in our tradition. But obviously, he's a medical doctor with roots in the medical profession. However, Dr. Rania Awad teaches us that we would not have medicine, particularly holistic medicine, today were it not for the efforts of Muslims when we were the world's intellectual leaders**.**

*Dr. Islam:*
Thank you so much, Dr. Jones, for sharing your background, insights, and wisdom that you bring to the table. I know chaplaincy is still a newly forming field in a way, especially in our community. So, we definitely need people to share their insights. I also think you have that unique perspective of being able to look at other communities and compare what's needed and what's deficient. I thought your explanation of different institutions trying to train Muslim chaplains was both interesting and really unique. I think that should be shared more. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

*Dr. Jones:*
The main thing I'd like to share is that we Muslims need to get serious about training our own leadership. I often tell parents, "Don't depend on the MSA to save your children." We need more robust institutions that will help us with our young people in particular.

*Dr. Islam:*
Thank you so much.

## Reflections

Chaplaincy is deeply rooted in the Islamic faith and practice and within the Sunna of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Dr. Nazila Isgandarova, in her book *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* (Pandora Press, 2018), and Dr. Jones, in his interview, both relay the same idea: Islamic chaplaincy is not limited to the mosque, but is in actively engaging with people in distress in various locations and situations—in hospitals, at funerals, in schools, and in family matters. Practicing chaplaincy is often implemented by offering spiritual guidance while addressing real-world issues like mental health, family conflicts, or personal crises. Drawing from their advice, I believe that if Muslim chaplains wish to be effective, they should follow the Prophet's example to become compassionate, patient, and trustworthy leaders during emotional and spiritual crises.

Dr. Jones explains that part of his practice often involves giving advice, thereby revealing that a chaplain's role isn't just about formal counseling, but about guiding care seekers to Islam's teachings. This unique sort of guidance, particularly when people are vulnerable, is an important part of Islamic leadership. In the interview, Dr. Jones discusses how chaplaincy moving forward must meet the needs of the growing Muslim community. As the role of Muslim chaplains becomes increasingly important, our community must take a more proactive approach in training and equipping them by developing Islamic institutions and standards that are firmly rooted in Islamic principles and equipped to engage with the modern world.

Dr. Jones discussed the current situation of leadership training for Muslim chaplains being done through Christian institutions or secular settings. I agree with his concern that this can lead to a disconnect with the values and needs of our community. There is an urgent need for Muslim-run seminaries and institutions that not only align with Islamic values and methodologies but are deeply grounded within them, thereby providing spiritually informed and culturally relevant leadership. Drawing from Isgandarova's book, chaplains and imams are more than just religious figures. They are anchors of spiritual and emotional support for their communities.

Dr. Jones emphasizes the need for Muslim-led institutions to train leaders who understand the community's unique needs. Professionalizing chaplaincy also includes setting clear standards and creating structured training. I believe the community should invest more in developing dedicated chaplaincy programs and establishing clear, widely accepted standards to equip future leaders with the necessary tools to navigate their roles effectively.

In addition, he describes chaplains as often being in interfaith spaces where they represent Islam to the wider world. Operating in public spaces should engender a heightened sense of responsibility to know and represent Islam in the best possible light. After all, there are opportunities for *daʿwa* in many of these spaces. Chaplains must be knowledgeable about Islam and have good chaplaincy soft skills to effectively navigate interfaith environments. Moreover, Dr. Jones contends that Islamic schools and seminaries of higher learning are crucial to the community's future. Robust institutions would also help prevent the loss of Islamic values in a secular society.

While I fully agree that our community must assume more responsibility in training our own chaplains to help preserve Islamic values, I recognize that there are several reasons for our delay in doing so. I feel that one of the core reasons may be rooted in both the taboo surrounding it and the general lack of awareness of its positive impact. From my perspective, there may be a certain taboo or hesitation associated with addressing spiritual care in the public sphere. Many societies have a divide between one's spiritual life and professional, secular life. There are also misconceptions about what chaplaincy involves. The idea of a religious figure acting as a counselor or guide in secular spaces can be viewed as unimportant or unnecessary. Furthermore, the chaplain's specific functions can sometimes be ambiguous. The spiritual needs of the modern Muslim community are often misunderstood. All of these factors can cause one to hesitate in embracing the role and its potential benefits.

Additionally, from my experience, there is a general lack of awareness about the profound impact that Muslim chaplains can have on individuals and communities. Unfortunately, the transformative work of a chaplain often goes unnoticed or is underappreciated. The public generally hears about chaplaincy when something goes wrong, rather than when chaplains make a significant, positive difference. Since the results of spiritual care are often intangible or difficult to measure, the profession's positive impact can be overlooked or underestimated, especially when compared to other more visible roles within institutions, such as healthcare spaces.

I believe an additional reason may be the scarcity of public case studies or widely known examples of chaplaincy's positive influence. While chaplains may serve silently in the background, few publicized stories showcase the positive difference that they make. I imagine sharing case studies taking place in our community could help alleviate this problem, for without these stories it becomes difficult for the broader public to understand or value chaplaincy's role.

To address these challenges, Muslim communities and institutions must invest in raising awareness about the field's role and potential. Publicizing success stories, case studies, and real-life examples of how chaplains have had a significant impact on individuals' lives could help shift public perception. Muslim chaplains themselves can also take proactive steps to engage with the broader community, offering talks, seminars, or interfaith initiatives that illustrate the multifaceted contributions they make.

More positive, inspiring, widely shared narratives can also reduce the taboo and raise awareness about the field. I believe that the better the perception the public has about chaplaincy and Muslim chaplains, the more persuaded people will be to support the development of Islamic seminaries to train them.

Dr. Jones saw the birth of Islamic chaplaincy in America during its key developmental time period. Through his interview, I gained a new appreciation for the foundation that his generation has provided. However, the responsibility for Islamic chaplaincy's future now lies with others. There are several practical steps toward change, among them investing in Muslim-run institutions; elevating community-wide support for chaplaincy and thereby engendering respect and support for more robust training; and developing and encouraging chaplain involvement in interfaith spaces. I am convinced that

spreading awareness about the positive, unseen work that chaplains do will lead to meaningful change.

## Conclusion

The development of Islamic chaplaincy in this country is an ongoing story of growth, challenges, and institutional development. Pioneering figures like Dr. Jones have been instrumental in advocating for formalizing the relevant training programs, such as TISA, that are both culturally and theologically appropriate for American Muslims. The path forward involves strengthening these institutions and ensuring that the next generation of Muslim leaders is trained not only to serve, but also to thrive and represent Islam in a variety of American contexts.

## Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo (eds.). *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

Reviewed by Ibrahim J. Long*

As Muslim chaplaincy continues to evolve, educators and practitioners increasingly require resources that effectively articulate and define the chaplaincy role within our faith community and across diverse institutional settings. *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century* (2022) meets this need as a valuable "resource for those exploring and preparing to be chaplains" (p. 4). This book provides a comprehensive introduction to the profession for practitioners of all faiths—or none—and can be supplemented with faith-specific resources to support the education and training of both current and aspiring Muslim chaplains.

Included within this text are the contributions of twenty-four authors, including Cadge and Rambo, who bring expertise and diverse perspectives on spiritual care. As an introductory text, it is highly practical and particularly relevant for individuals serving, or aiming to serve, in critical chaplaincy sectors such as corrections, the military, healthcare, and higher education. While designed as a "teaching tool [for use] in theological schools and clinical settings" (p. 4), it also offers valuable insights for experienced chaplaincy professionals and educators seeking to deepen their understanding of the field.

The book is divided into four sections, each comprised of two to four chapters. The first section overviews chaplaincy and its history within US institutions; the other three focus on specific categories of professional competency. Chapters flow easily from one to the next and are supplemented with discussion questions and recommended readings for easy adoption and use within the profession's training and educational programs. Spiritual care practices are explained clearly and without the usual Christian imagery and biblical references, which makes this book broadly accessible for chaplains of varying faiths as well as non-chaplaincy professionals. The contributors speak without being faith-specific, thereby centering the primary skills and activities that any chaplain may need within diverse institutional settings.

Chaplaincy students may appreciate that the key terms, when they are first used, are easily identifiable through bold text and defined in the glossary. However, the definitions are not always satisfying. Educators and keen learners would benefit from surveying the index to locate alternative descriptions or definitions of key terms provided by individual contributors. In some cases, a contributor's description may turn out to be

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more useful. For instance, a non-anxious presence is defined as a "common expectation of chaplains that involves the ability to remain calm and attentive to others experiencing emotional flooding" (p. 274). While this is an accurate summary of this essential skill, first-time learners may find it difficult to visualize how to enact it in practice. Elsewhere in the book, this term is more practically described as "using [one's] voice and posture to communicate a sense of calm [while] being present with careseekers yet detached from their chaotic emotions" (p. 74).

**Professional Competencies**

One of the book's unique features is the editors' categorization of spiritual care skills into three primary areas: meaning-making, interpersonal competencies, and organizational competencies. Spiritual care educators will find these areas helpful when developing and evaluating chaplaincy training and educational programs. The editors even include a competency checklist as an appendix (pp. 269–271) with prompting questions, such as: "How does the program help students do the internal/psychological work that will enable them to be more effective caregivers?" (p. 270). Examples of how programs may address these concerns are also provided.

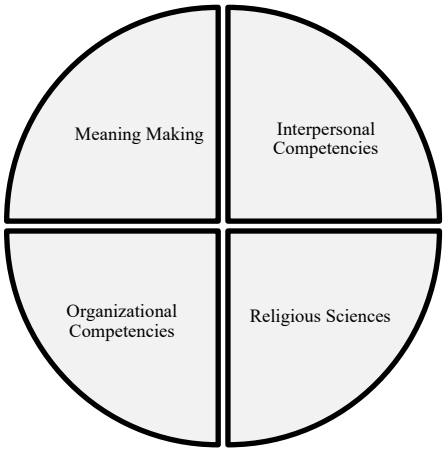


**Figure 1:** Four competency areas for Islamic chaplaincy

In Muslim chaplaincy programs, these three areas of competency should be expanded to include a fourth: those Islamic religious sciences (*ʿulūm al-dīn*) that are most relevant to professional spiritual care. Designating the religious sciences as a separate category would help educators and learners clearly distinguish between the role of traditional Islamic religious sciences (such as *fiqh*, *kalām*, and ḥadīth) and other essential skills needed for effective Muslim chaplaincy—while acknowledging their significant overlap. As Muslim chaplaincy programs continue to emerge and evolve, discussions about curriculum focus are actively shaping the teaching and practice of Islamic spiritual care. This has resulted in inconsistent standards and unequal emphasis on critical skills across different programs. Focusing on these four professional competency categories (see **Figure 1**) can help establish consistent professional standards by ensuring learners gain essential knowledge and skills in each area. While the approach to these competencies may differ between programs, every learner will have gained a comprehensive foundation for Islamic spiritual care.

**Supplementing with Muslim Perspectives**

Unfortunately, the book only includes one Muslim contributor: Imam Dr. Bilal Ansari. Given the increasing number of graduates from Islamic chaplaincy programs across North America, I would have liked to see more Muslim contributors. That being said, two Muslim chaplains are featured in short vignettes titled "Voices from the Field" (pp. 10–11, 79), and the index indicates several references to Islam and Muslims (see p. 317). However, in most instances, they are minor and make no significant contribution to an author's overall point. An encounter between a Muslim and non-Muslim chaplain is described (pp. 70–73) and then commented upon throughout the rest of the chapter (see Chapter 3). However, the applicability of this case for Muslim chaplains is limited. For Muslim educators, I suggest supplementing this text with stories from *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (Templeton Press, 2022) and inviting professional Muslim chaplains into the classroom to share their professional insights and case examples.

# Nazila Isgandarova. *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices*. Pandora Press, 2019.

Reviewed by Mona Islam*

Author of *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* (2019), Dr. Nazila Isgandarova served for years as a multifaith spiritual care provider in a long-term care facility and currently works in a mental health institution. She received a doctorate in spiritual care and psychotherapy from Waterloo Lutheran at Wilfrid University and completed a second doctorate from Emanuel College at the University of Toronto. She has been trained as a multi-faith spiritual care provider and is now a specialist in spiritual care in CASC, a Registered Psychotherapist at the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, and a Registered Social Worker (p. 10).

*Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* establishes Islamic spiritual care as an obligation for the Muslim community, grounded in evidence from the Qur'ān and Sunna, and then traces its historical evolution while addressing current challenges. The central questions that the book addresses are "What are the needs of Muslims in different settings?" and "What are the theoretical frameworks and thus interventions of an appropriate care for Muslims?" (p. 15).

The purpose of this book is best defined by the author's intentions. Dr. Isgandarova states that the "purpose of this book is to help Muslim spiritual caregivers and other healthcare professionals enhance the compassionate care they provide their clients in a variety of institutionalized settings" (p. 13), including "hospitals, long term care centers, hospice/palliative care programs, health clinics, counseling centers, children and youth agencies, mental health and substance use programs, adult day care, etc." (p. 15).

The primary audience for this book seems to be those already familiar with Islam, or those seeking a refresher, as it heavily references the Qur'ān and Sunna. However, the author suggests it can also benefit a broader group, including individuals interested in Islam, "Imams, theology students, social science scholars, Muslim spiritual caregivers, educators, healthcare providers, and anyone interacting with Muslims" (p. 16). The author also acknowledges her personal biases and assumptions and outlines key beliefs, such as the mission of Islamic spiritual care to nurture Muslims' spirituality across various settings, addressing their spiritual, physical, psychological, mental, and social needs (p. 13).

The book is organized into four large parts, each divided into several sections thematically. Part 1 defines spiritual care in Islam in the context of health and healing. Part 2 provides a general and brief historical overview of Islamic spiritual care, foundations, and main approaches and discusses the use of traditional resources and social sciences. The next half of the book is more particular, in that part 3 addresses the spiritual and religious

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needs of special populations, specifically LGBTQ individuals and elders. Finally, part 4 deals with specific spiritual and religious care needs of Muslims in various settings and includes seventeen different topics.

I was intrigued by the author's comprehensive approach to spiritual care in Islam, starting from the very essence of the spirit. In contrast to secular texts or works centered on other faiths, Dr. Isgandarova starts by defining the concept of the spirit in Islam and gradually constructs the concept of spiritual and religious care.

In part 1 section 1 of the book, Dr. Isgandarova defines the concept of *rūḥ* (spirit) and its central role in achieving human perfection. The author explains that Islamic counseling's primary goal is to guide individuals toward personal growth, drawing on the works of fifth-century scholars. However, it is also noted that humans have limitations in comprehending the extraordinary, including supernatural events and miracles. The author stresses the importance of using precise terminology when discussing the spirit, particularly in clinical contexts such as assessments, diagnoses, and treatments. A crucial issue addressed in this book is the distinction between spirit and soul. While later generations of Muslims often use these terms interchangeably, the Qur'ān clearly differentiates between them, which has significant implications for understanding their roles in spiritual care and clinical practice. Furthermore, the author adds that the origins of the spirit remain ambiguous in the Qur'ān, adding to the complexity of comprehending its role on Earth. The author references classical Islamic definitions of the *rūḥ* as a divine mystery, citing scholars such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and ʿAbd al-Razzāq. The author even includes the Shi'a view of the spirit which allows for the possibility of divine revelation being received by certain individuals, further illustrating the diversity of thought surrounding this concept.

Section 2, "Health and Healing in Islam," emphasizes the sanctity of life, prohibiting suicide and euthanasia. Islamic teachings regard the physical body as a sacred vessel for the spirit, with the Qur'ān and ḥadīth corpus stressing the importance of seeking healing and managing illness. This concept is further highlighted by the works of Muslim scholars and physicians like Ibn Sīnā, who integrated physical, emotional, and spiritual health in his medical philosophy. This section acknowledges the diversity of healing traditions within the Muslim world, shaped by historical, sociocultural, and theological factors.

In Islamic healing, illness is viewed as an opportunity for spiritual growth and purification, where sins are forgiven, and supplications are accepted. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, "Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your illness…" (*Shuʿab al-īmān li-l-Bayhaqī*, no. 10250), emphasizing the value of good health. He also stated, "God did not create a disease without creating for it a cure" (*Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 3436). While some Muslims may endure illness as a form of spiritual reward, others take a more proactive approach to alleviate pain.

The next section, "Visting the Sick," cites Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīths that highlight the emotional and spiritual benefits of supporting the sick, reducing isolation and fostering emotional connection. The author portrays the caregiver as a source of compassion and peace for the sick when they recite Qur'ānic verses, drawing on the

example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who offered comfort through prayers for healing and reassurances of God's mercy.

Finally, section 4 of part 1 addresses a key aspect of spiritual care in Islam: creating a supportive environment which aligns with Islamic values. The author observes that while Muslims in Canada—the country in which she is based—may not have their own hospitals, various organizations attempt to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of Muslim communities. These include institutions like the Canadian Islamic Congress, ISNA, and others that provide spiritual and religious support. In this vein, Isgandarova highlights the mosque's role in addressing the spiritual needs of Muslims, noting that while many caregivers represent the mosque, the institution struggles to adapt to modern demands. Traditionally, the mosque has also served as a center for social functions like weddings, funerals, and legal matters.

The author points out that Islamic spiritual care is not solely the responsibility of imams but requires qualified individuals with expertise in Islamic teachings, including the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, *fiqh*, and *tajwīd*, along with proficiency in both English and Arabic. Spiritual caregivers must also engage in interfaith activities, counseling, outreach, and education, including teaching Islam to non-Muslims. Finally, the book emphasizes that a Muslim spiritual caregiver must demonstrate emotional and spiritual maturity, as well as an understanding of one's own biases and cultural values. These qualities ensure that caregivers can meet the spiritual and emotional needs of their community with empathy, insight, and wisdom.

After establishing a background in part 1 of the book, Dr. Isgandarova dedicates part 2 to a more practical discussion, "Practicing Islamic Spiritual Care." This second part is divided into four sections.

Islamic spiritual care has its historical roots in the Prophetic period (610–632 CE). It has always been considered a personal and communal responsibility, although there was no institutionalized form of Islamic spiritual care. In this section, both *farḍ ʿayn* (individual duty) and *farḍ kifāya* (communal obligation) are described.

The first section of part 2 gives historical accounts, dating as early as *Kitāb al-Uqalāʾ al-Majānīn* by Nīshāpūrī. The Islamic Golden Age (750–1257 CE) saw the establishment of hospitals that combined physical care with spiritual care, exemplified by famous institutions like those in Baghdad and Cairo, where care was provided free of charge.

In the second section of part 2, "Foundations of Islamic Spiritual Care," the author explains how the Qur'ān and ḥadīth corpus correlate spiritual diseases to physical and mental ailments. Scholars like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr contributed to the understanding of the mind-body-spirit connection, emphasizing prayer (*ṣalāt*), supplication (*duʿāʾ*), and remembrance of God (*dhikr*) as healing practices that benefit both physical and psychological health. Spiritual caregivers are encouraged to integrate prayer, ritual practices, and Qur'ānic recitations into their care, to bring psychological as well as spiritual and physical healing. Dr. Muzammil Siddiqui is quoted to explain that spiritual care is deeply tied to the process of self-care and maintaining a healthy body and spirit as a trust from God.

Three primary approaches to Islamic spiritual care are outlined, including the Theological/Spiritual Approach, Social Science Approach, and Integrative Approach. The Theological/Spiritual Approach focuses on traditional healing practices, such as Sufi methods and the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) to address spiritual and emotional issues. The Social Science Approach uses modern theories from psychiatry and psychology to interpret issues like mental health but is critiqued for not addressing spiritual concerns sufficiently. It includes therapies like Solution-Focused Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Finally, the Integrative Approach combines theological understanding with social science theories, aiming to bridge the gap between spiritual healing and modern psychotherapy. It addresses existential concerns, the nature of God, and the afterlife as they relate to human well-being.

The author recommends that modern Muslim spiritual caregivers integrate psychological knowledge with theological training, involving a combination of prayer, ritual observances, and therapeutic practices in order to achieve best results. Prophetic medicine (*al-ṭibb al-nabawī*) as well as folk healing (*al-ṭibb al-rūḥānī*) are introduced as practices that are still used today. Some examples of these are using honey, black seed, cupping therapy (*ḥijāma*), and *ruqya* (spiritual healing through Qur'ānic recitation). The use of music—in this case, the recitation of the Qur'ān in a melodious voice—is known to have therapeutic applications in spiritual care and is sometimes used within hospitals to promote healing. The central message in this part of the book is that there is a need for a holistic approach to health that goes beyond physical treatment. Spiritual care providers who are well-versed in both religious traditions and modern psychological theories are better equipped to support individuals in their healing journeys.

I was surprised by the sympathetic perspective the author showed toward the LGBTQ community in part 3 of this book, especially considering how this aligns with Islamic values. The section begins by addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ-identifying Muslims, particularly due to the scarcity of relevant literature. Many existing resources are outdated, and there is a noticeable lack of current discussions on the experiences and needs of LGBTQ Muslims within the context of Islamic spiritual care. The author shares valuable insights, such as how members of the LGBTQ community often view Islamic texts and traditions as oppressive while trying to reconcile their faith with their sexuality.

I was also unaware that historical accounts indicate that the death penalties for homosexual acts in the past were not necessarily related to one's sexual orientation, but rather to other crimes like apostasy or assault. The author further highlights that LGBTQ Muslims are at a higher risk of mental health issues due to societal intolerance and the internal struggle of reconciling their faith with their sexual identity. The author encourages spiritual caregivers to become more familiar with inclusive language and perspectives to make LGBTQ Muslims feel accepted. A framework for providing LGBTQ-friendly spiritual care is presented, demonstrating the author's up-to-date knowledge of the issue. Examples like inclusive mosques, such as Salam Mosque in Canada, and practices within Rafaʿi Sufi traditions, offer a practical approach to addressing these concerns.

The second part of this section shifts focus to the spiritual care needs of Muslim elders, revealing a significant gap in both literature and healthcare professionals'

understanding of the spiritual needs of aging Muslim populations. Research on elderly Muslims typically centers on maintaining independence, managing health problems, and coping with cognitive decline. However, the book underscores a growing recognition of the important role religion plays in the aging process, with many elders finding comfort in spiritual practices. Researchers like Moberg have identified key areas of spiritual need for the elderly, such as relief from anxiety, preparation for death, and the maintenance of personal dignity. The section concludes by asserting that Islam encourages the elderly to embrace spirituality and serve as role models for younger generations.

The practice of visiting the sick is also emphasized, ensuring that elderly Muslims receive the emotional and spiritual support they need. Ritual practices in Islam are noted for their protective benefits against mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Additionally, the practice of "life review" is presented as a helpful tool for identifying unresolved conflicts and life gaps, which may contribute to enhancing the spiritual well-being of aging Muslims.

Part 4 of *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care* addresses seventeen separate issues in spiritual care. It discusses the practical and spiritual needs of Muslim patients, such as providing access to clean spaces for daily prayers, facilitating fasting during Ramadan, and considering health risks associated with the Hajj pilgrimage. The section also highlights gender-sensitive care, with Muslims often preferring caregivers of the same gender, and the role of spiritual caregivers in supporting patients through life's major transitions. Topics like birth, death, and end-of-life care are addressed, including the rituals and practices that ensure the dignity and spiritual well-being of patients. The book discusses the significance of rites such as the *aẓān* (call to prayer), burial customs, and ethical considerations surrounding organ donation and physician-assisted suicide. Through these practices, spiritual care plays a vital role in the holistic well-being of Muslim patients, combining both physical and spiritual support tailored to Islamic values.

Dr. Isgandarova primarily relies on the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, and scholarly works to support her argument, with occasional references to sources outside the Islamic tradition. However, one notable gap in the book is the limited use of scientific or empirical data to demonstrate the benefits patients experience from the recommended practices. Including case studies or examples of applied spiritual care would strengthen her argument and provide more tangible evidence of its positive impact.

The book makes a valuable contribution to the field, serving as a "pocket or reference book" (p. 16). However, its encyclopedic style may not appeal to all readers. By providing a historical overview of spiritual care in Islam, from the time of Prophet Muhammad to the present, it offers valuable insights into the evolution of this practice.

One of the book's strengths is its clear organization and its consistent focus on the Qur'ān and Sunna, with minimal deviation from these core sources. The author introduces a wide range of terms, all of which are clearly defined both within the text and in a designated glossary at the end. The glossary contains approximately fifty terms, many of which would be particularly beneficial for non-Muslim readers to understand. As such, it serves as a valuable resource for non-Muslim providers.

The book has notable deficiencies and areas for improvement. While I found no factual inaccuracies, it does not provide "a prescribed solution to every situation" (p. 15)

as promised. My main concern is the lack of sentence clarity in several sections, where confusing phrasing disrupts the flow of ideas. Additionally, various grammatical issues need attention. A more thorough editorial review would improve readability and coherence.

Furthermore, I found the author's position on certain controversial or non-mainstream topics to be unclear. For example, the author seems particularly sympathetic toward the LGBTQ community, which led me to question how this aligns with Islamic values. The inclusion of a section on Nowruz, an unfamiliar festival to Western audiences, also struck me as an odd choice for a book directed at them. Personally, I found the book less compelling because much of the content was not new to me, though it did consolidate information in one place.

All in all, Dr. Isgandarova's *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* offers an invaluable resource that bridges historical, theological, and contemporary perspectives, while highlighting both the importance and challenges of providing culturally sensitive spiritual care within diverse Muslim communities. Moving forward, I hope that future offerings will further incorporate empirical research and case studies, providing a stronger evidence base for the practical benefits of Islamic spiritual care.

# Towards a Traditional Islamically Integrated Chaplaincy: A Book Review of *With the Heart in Mind* and *When Hearing Becomes Listening* by Mikaeel Ahmed Smith

Reviewed by Raymond Elias*

In my chaplaincy journey from Master of Divinity (MDiv) studies to Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), and then to full time as a hospital staff chaplain, a common thread has emerged: listening and basic attending skills form the basis of any spiritual care visit and assessment. Sometimes staff will comment: "We're so glad you're here, Chaplain… we don't know what to say… it's all yours," indicating the medical team's discomfort with navigating human emotions as well as social and cultural issues, and not knowing how to address wider spiritual and existential concerns at the end of life. This discomfort comes from not being adequately trained in deep listening and attending skills, including emotional intelligence. Deep listening and emotional intelligence entails attention to the internal conversations within ourselves, exploring our own insecurities and needs as well as the external social pressures on us through the expectations of others, whether they be family, friends, work colleagues, community members or society at large.

That is why Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith's two books, *With the Heart in Mind: The Moral and Emotional Intelligence of the Prophet (S)* (2021) and *When Hearing Becomes Listening: Prophetic Listening and How It Can Transform the World Within Us and Around Us* (2023), are so important for not only the development of Islamic chaplaincy programs in North America, but also Clinical Pastoral Education programs seeking to be more inclusive. In *With the Heart in Mind*, Shaykh Mikaeel, an Islamic scholar (*ʿālim*), starts from a place of profound self-awareness when he writes:

> I realized that one's ability to cause change and influence others is based solely on this [emotional] intelligence. I was further encouraged to write this particular section after witnessing a problem within myself. I noticed that I lacked the ability to deeply connect with the people around me. I lacked the ability to understand the ones whom I claimed to love the most. I wondered why I struggled with this problem. The shallowness of my relationships was even more troublesome because I claimed to follow a Prophet, who through research and based on the testimony of thousands of eyewitnesses, was a master of deep connection and understanding. How could I follow in his footsteps and inspire change in the hearts of others

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> without fixing this problem? So, I began studying the life of the Prophet (s) solely from the perspective of Emotional Intelligence. (p. 21)

**Chaplaincy in North America: Spiritual Care Integrated with the Social Sciences**

In section I of *With the Heart in Mind*, before diving into the book's main theme, Shaykh Mikaeel starts in an unexpected place by addressing the philosophical implications of the modern Western worldview. He writes how philosophers John Locke and Baruch Spinoza "attempted to divorce rationality from the soul" and replaced it with a focus on the mind as the seat of the psyche and intellect (*With the Heart in Mind*, pp. 14–15). Shaykh Mikaeel then contrasts modern thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon with Aristotle and pre-modern Islamic thinkers such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, and Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (pp. 15–18). Due to the influence of modern and post-modern thought in conceptualizing the approaches and frameworks of contemporary chaplaincy programs, Shaykh Mikaeel's address of these philosophical underpinnings is necessary and important, especially for Muslim chaplaincy students sincerely seeking to understand how to reach the desired outcome of professional chaplaincy, which necessitates integrating the Islamic tradition with theories of psychology and the social sciences.

The word "chaplain" typically conjures up images of Christian clergy members working at a hospital, leading to assumptions that it is not relevant for Muslim patients, families, or staff. However, the professionalization of chaplaincy over the past few decades moved the field closer towards the values of compassionate non-judgmental listening and presence, more inclusive views of interfaith engagement, and an integration with other academic sciences. As an example, the Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc—which is currently the national standard for professional chaplains to demonstrate competency and ethical standards in chaplaincy—outlines twenty-nine specific competencies required to become a board certified chaplain. Those seeking board certification are required to demonstrate these competencies in four main areas of chaplaincy and spiritual care: 1) Integration of Theory and Practice; 2) Professional Identity and Conduct; 3) Professional Practice Skills; and 4) Organizational Leadership (Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc, n.d.). In particular, the essay for the Integration of Theory and Practice section asks applicants to "articulate an approach to spiritual care, rooted in one's faith/spiritual tradition, that is integrated with a theory of professional practice" (Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc, n.d.). The integration of these theories includes a "working knowledge of psychological and sociological disciplines *and* religious beliefs and practices in the provision of spiritual care" (emphasis mine), incorporating the "spiritual and emotional dimensions of human development into one's practice of care," as well as "working knowledge of different ethical theories appropriate to one's professional context" and "conceptual understanding of group dynamics and organizational behavior" (Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc, n.d.).

**Interpersonal Emotional Intelligence**

As we move into section II of *With the Heart in Mind*, which focuses on the book's main theme of emotional intelligence, Shaykh Mikaeel bases his examination of the Prophet's life and characteristics on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (pp. 21, 25–26). Similar to the goals of Clinical Pastoral Education, the goal of studying the emotional intelligence of the Prophet Muhammad—according to the author—is for it to be used as a "tool for change" (p. 57). With this goal in mind, he then names two key areas of emotional intelligence: "emotional awareness" which includes "intrapersonal awareness or self-knowledge" (p. 61) and "interpersonal emotional awareness: we are wired to connect" (p. 63). Intrapersonal awareness is given a thorough treatment in his second book, *When Hearing Becomes Listening*, while in *With the Heart in Mind* he focuses much of the discussion on body language as part of the language of emotion.

The author synthesizes what Gardner calls "bodily intelligence" with a story about a companion who walked into the Prophet's masjid. Although the mosque was mostly empty, the Prophet's interpersonal awareness was so keen that he moved in a way to indicate he was making space for the entering companion, and later told the man: "It is the right of a Muslim that when his brother sees him approach that the former at least makes some movement for him" (p. 80–81; *Shuʿab al-Īmān* of Bayhaqī, vol. 11, p. 273). Shaykh Mikaeel describes how "some people seem to lack the emotional awareness necessary for positive interaction with others because they simply don't understand the language of emotions" (p. 80). This is something that chaplains who have gone through CPE learn as part of the journey in developing better attending skills: how "slight eye movements, body positioning, and verbal inflection are gestures that can communicate pain, anxiety, and joy" (p. 80).

Related to emotional awareness is "emotional understanding." The author narrates a fable about an angry lion who frightens a village of people, the plot twist being that the lion had a thorn in its paw which caused it to act in this way. Shaykh Mikaeel shares how the lion in this fable "knew [what] the source of his pain was but was unable to communicate his need for help" and how an emotionally intelligent person "has to delicately remove the psychological or emotional thorn" (p. 91). In my work as a healthcare chaplain, there are many instances when a "scary" or intimidating patient may frighten the staff. Through the process of de-escalating the situation, which includes listening and understanding the distressed person's story, we can learn "why people feel and act the way they do" (p. 90) so that the emotional thorn that Shaykh Mikaeel describes is removed, leading to better care *for* the patient from the medical team, contributing to overall healing.

The author also mentions an aspect of the Prophet Muhammad's emotional and social intelligence that is not often considered, describing how the Prophet "regularly used physical touch to communicate love and to comfort those who were in pain and suffering" (p. 84). He discusses several instances where the Prophet Muhammad used physical touch in order to connect to those around him, such as hugging and kissing his grandsons, running his hand over the head of young children, and intimate moments with his wives. The author also quotes the Prophet's advice on hand shaking: "Shake hands with one another because it removes malice from the hearts" (*al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Imām Mālik, chapter 47, ḥadīth no.

16), and how a companion described the quality of the Prophet's handshake: "Whenever a person would shake his hand, the Prophet would not let go until the other person let go first… he was always the first to shake a person's hand" (p. 85; *al-Shifāʾ* of Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ). Shaykh Mikaeel weaves these snapshots of the Prophet Muhammad's interactions with quotes from social science books and studies as well as a personal childhood memory, sharing how, "A warm touch sets off a release of oxytocin, a hormone that helps create a sensation of trust, and reduces levels of the stress hormone, cortisol" (p. 89). The author relates a powerful story of how the companion Fuḍāla initially intended to murder the Prophet as the latter made *ṭawāf* (circumambulated around the Kaʿba in worship), but was then shocked by the Prophet addressing him, expressing his knowledge of Fuḍāla's thoughts. This narration culminates with the Prophet touching Fuḍāla's chest in such a way that the anger and intention for murder left his heart.[1] Shaykh Mikaeel implores the reader regarding the special significance of touch in relation to the Prophet's emotional intelligence:

> We have to learn how to touch those in need similarly to the way the Prophet touched people. Fudalah's heart was filled with rage and anger and it knew no other recourse to alleviating that rage than through bloodshed. It was a touch of peace and love that removed those noxious emotions from his heart. (p. 90; Smith's transliteration)

Although Shaykh Mikaeel describes the beneficial and healing aspects of touch, if we look closely, we can observe that the instances of physical touch that he highlights between the Prophet Muhammad and others are those that are widely understood by scholars to be Islamically permissible: they occurred with men, or youth who had not yet reached the age of puberty, or his wives. In other words, the women that he touched were those to whom he was a *maḥram* (those he was related to through close kinship, breastfeeding, or marriage) (Hirani 2019, 22–24). In his book *Principles of Men-Women Interaction in Islam*, Dr. Asif Hirani shares guidelines, based on Islamic sources, around several types of interactions that can occur between men and women. In it, he mentions a narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: "Indeed, I do not shake hands with women" (*Sunan al-Nisāʾī*, no. 4181; *Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 2874), pointing out that he did not hold the hand of women when he took their *bayʿa* (oath of allegiance) at ʿAqaba in the same way that he held the hand of each man (Hirani 2019, 47). While Hirani addresses several other topics of cross-gender interactions, such as the *ʿawra*, respectful gaze and conversation, and avoiding meeting in private, the topic of physical touch is an area of particular difficulty that Muslim chaplains navigating the norms of largely non-Muslim institutions encounter as they serve both Muslim and non-Muslim care seekers.

## Intrapersonal Emotional Intelligence

In contrast to his opening *With the Heart in Mind* with the philosophical underpinnings of Western and Islamic thinkers, Shaykh Mikaeel starts his second book, *When Hearing*

[1] This incident is narrated in *Sīrat Ibn Hishām* 2/417 and Ibn Kathīr's *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* 6/585.

*Becomes Listening*, with the Islamic theological foundations for listening, taken from the Qurʾān and Sunna, and rooted in the names and attributes of God—attributes which can be reflected within our human capacities (*When Hearing Becomes Listening*, p. 5). Building upon this foundation, he emphasizes that to nurture healthy and successful intra- and interpersonal attachments, we must not only listen to ourselves (self-awareness) and others (interpersonal awareness), but listen to and attach to God. In chapter 2, entitled "Reclaiming Deep Listening Today," the author seamlessly blends the Islamic tradition with contemporary theories of attachment and social brain theory. He highlights the connection between *words* and *feelings* by sharing insights from commentators of the Qurʾān on the Qurʾānic term *bayān* found in Sūrat al-Raḥmān. Some examples include al-Ālūsī ("the meaning of the fourth verse is that Allah gave the children of Adam the ability to express what is within them and to comprehend what is within others") and Ibn ʿĀshūr ("*bayān* means articulation of that which is within a person's heart," transliteration mine) (p. 34). Shaykh Mikaeel takes attachment theory concepts which speak on how the depth or shallowness of our cognitive investments affect our development of trust and our ability to connect with others—beginning in childhood with our parents—and extends them to show how this also shapes the quality of our connection and attachment to Allah (pp. 49–51).

Going back to his definition of emotional intelligence as consisting of both intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness (*With the Heart in Mind*, pp. 61, 63), within *When Hearing Becomes Listening*, the author provides greater depth into the former. He does this by focusing on the internal barriers and disruptions to deep listening—this is especially important for Muslim chaplains, as deep listening forms the basis of any relational encounter and is the very nature of chaplaincy. In chapters 3 and 4, entitled "Understanding Communication" and "Noise Detox Process," Shaykh Mikaeel unpacks how the internal world of each person can reduce his or her ability to listen and can lead to miscommunication: "The person who fails to become a listener of themself will hear the words that others are saying, not as they are intended to be heard, but rather through the filter of his or her own misunderstood emotions" (p. 86). The author invites the reader to "think of your feelings, emotions, inclinations, and thoughts as instruments in an orchestra," which he says can get out of tune without spiritual purification, descending from a professional orchestra into a school band with "nothing but a noisy heart, unable to focus, confused, and worst of all inaccurately filtering all that we hear and see" (p. 87). Infusing Islamic spirituality into the conversation, Shaykh Mikaeel connects internal self-awareness and listening to the "process of working on yourself or *tazkiyah*" (Smith's transliteration) and explains that the "spiritual ailments that we have, whether anger, greed, or jealousy, are the noises that distort what we hear" (pp. 88–89). He also frames the popular current discourse on narcissism in terms of its underlying spiritual disease, using a compound Arabic word as a descriptor: *ananiyya*, "composed of two words, ana (I) and niyya (intention)" (p. 91). Shaykh Mikaeel applies this concept to the Qurʾānic story of Iblīs (Satan), who, out of his jealousy of Adam, said to Allah, "I am better than him" (Qurʾān 7:12). According to the author, "His full statement shows us that the most destructive type of noise preventing us from correctly receiving the messages that come to us is excessive self-love" (p. 91). This is also a critique of modern societal trends in the

Western world that focus self-help spirituality towards the self, which in excess is blameworthy and part of the noise that prevents us from getting outside of ourselves when listening to others.

Shaykh Mikaeel presents the works of two classical Islamic scholars—Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-Sālikīn* and ʿIzz al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Salām's commentary on Imām al-Muḥāsibī's *al-Riʿāya*—as examples documenting deep listening, presence, and attending skills from the Qurʾān and Sunna (pp. 97, 117). As a counterweight to haste in our human interactions, a quality which can diminish listening, Shaykh Mikaeel says that ʿIzz al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Salām speaks about "spiritual transformation" (p. 97). He describes deep listening as a tangible attending skill and names listening presence as a command in the Qurʾān. Shaykh Mikaeel appears to offer two different translations of the same Qurʾānic verse (50:37), perhaps as a demonstration of deeper listening and reflection: "Truly in all that is a mighty reminder for whoever has a sapient heart or listens with all he has, while present and aware" as part of 'Izz al-Dīn's longer quote, and then restating it again as a part of his analysis of the same quote: "Indeed in that is a reminder for those who listen closely while being present" (pp. 97–98). In chapter 5, Shaykh Mikaeel uses Ibn al-Qayyim's three levels of listening to create an Islamic deep listening framework: 1) *samaʿ ʿidrak* ("hearing with the ears"); 2) *samaʿ fahm* ("listening for understanding"); and 3) *samaʿ ijāba* ("listening to respond") (p. 117). Here the author notes the common refrain of today that listening to respond is frowned upon as not good listening. However, he clarifies that what Ibn al-Qayyim means by listening to respond is what chaplaincy students would recognize as a form of attending skills taught in pastoral care and counseling courses: where one gives prompting statements, asks clarifying questions, and paraphrases what was shared in order to demonstrate to the care seeker that they are in fact listening and that they are attempting to go further by clarifying their understanding of the speaker (pp. 124–125). A crucial point that Shaykh Mikaeel makes is how listening to respond also entails taking people's context and circumstances into consideration. As an example, he shares how the Prophet Muhammad responded to the question, "What is the best deed in Islam?" with different answers each time he was asked, noting that Islamic scholars interpret this as the Prophet's listening to the context of the person in front of him and responding by meeting them where they were. Shaykh Mikaeel explains that the multifaith context of Medina meant that responding adeptly was important, as the Prophet "was not only surrounded by sincere believers but also staunch enemies and shameless hypocrites" and "His ability to shift responses based on the person allowed for many potentially dangerous situations to be defused" (p. 126). As Muslim chaplains also find themselves in the multifaith and multicultural environments of the institutions they serve, the ability to engage in deep listening and attending skills that de-escalate potential violence and misunderstanding is an essential part of a Prophetic spiritual care that extends to all.

After describing the process of detoxing internal noise, cultivating presence, and listening for understanding, Shaykh Mikaeel asks the reader a poignant question: "What Do We Gain From Deep Listening?" His answer is a product similar to that of the CPE chaplain formation process. What he refers to as "inner silence" corresponds to the non-anxious presence that my own CPE educators would often remind us is a necessary ingredient for a successful spiritual care intervention with patients, families, and staff (pp.

131–132). Chapter 6 of *When Hearing Becomes Listening* both summarizes and provides a justification for the field of Islamic chaplaincy, with references to "empathic confidants as helpers and healers," how "connection through listening is the only cure for loneliness," and the value of "close confidants at the time of death"—all important roles that chaplains are trained in and should embody (pp. 137–138, 143). In terms of "empathic confidants as helpers and healers," Shaykh Mikaeel quotes research from a study by Thomas Wills and his team which found that "having a close confidant and a functional support network can even help a person heal from severe medical problems" (p. 137).[2] He also highlights four levels of listening, theorized by Stephen Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (Simon and Schuster, 1989), which culminate in "empathic listening"—and correlates this with teachings within Prophet Muhammad's first speech to the believers upon immigrating to Medina: "O people, spread greetings of peace. Feed one another. Establish the bonds of kinship and pray at night when others are sleeping! You will enter paradise with peace" (pp. 138–140). Shaykh Mikaeel shows the connection between listening and empathy, emphasizing: "It is empathetic listening that is the most effective agent for fostering personal growth and improving our relationships. So when Allah repeatedly tells us in the Quran and through the words of the Prophet that we must join the bonds of connection between us, we are essentially being told to develop the willingness to listen" (p. 139, Smith's transliteration).

Addressing how "connection through listening is the only cure for loneliness," Shaykh Mikaeel connects feelings of loneliness in ourselves and within others to a disruption in the listening relationship "with self, others, and our Creator" (p. 138). He argues that loneliness is not only a product of human social interaction, but also a spiritual interaction (or lack thereof) between individuals and God.

As it relates to "close confidants at the time of death," Shaykh Mikaeel identifies how "Being in places we have never been before can be overwhelming and even scary without the presence of another person," and he presents how the Prophet Muhammad's instruction about "Reading Quran, talking to them, and praying for them helps them easily and comfortably transition to the next realm of existence" (pp. 143–144, Smith's transliteration).

Through the above descriptions, the author helps articulate why the role of chaplains is so important. Muslim chaplains provide essential comfort and healing to others when they serve as empathic and attentive companions, locating those within institutions who are lonely and lacking social support networks, and facilitating much-needed spiritual interventions at the end of life for patients and their families, to witness as smooth and comforting a death as possible.

What Shaykh Mikaeel demonstrates when it comes to the importance of emotional intelligence and deep listening from an Islamic perspective reflects the goals of CPE curriculums, which include a focus on the development of greater self-awareness in trainees, through the "action-reflection-action model," in order to provide better spiritual

[2] See the study at: Thomas A. Wills, Erin O'Carroll Bantum, and Michael G. Ainette, "Social Support," in *Assessment in Health Psychology*, ed. Yael Benyamini, Marie Johnston, and Evangelos C. Karademas (Hogrefe, 2016), 131–146.

care and emotional support (Mai 2022). In my past experiences as a CPE intern and resident, this self-awareness entails practicing deep listening and embodying a non-anxious presence with patients, families, and staff, often in tragic moments when they may feel the most vulnerable they have ever felt in their lives. Training in these skills is accomplished through verbatims: recounting dialogue between the chaplain intern or resident and the care seeker. The chaplain intern or resident creates footnotes of the dialogue, noting how he or she was feeling and his or her internal dialogue during the care encounter, and this is then presented to and reflected upon with the CPE cohort, allowing all in the group to learn from this process of self-discovery. Training also includes individual supervision with a CPE educator, who helps facilitate the personal growth goals of each CPE participant, supervising their 300 hours of clinical time (providing spiritual care and emotional support to hospital patients, families, and staff) and 100 hours of education time (learning didactics from interdisciplinary teams, such as palliative care and social work, as well as topics that include social science theories on grief, group dynamics, cultural competency, interfaith awareness, and ethics) for each unit of CPE—with a chaplain residency program consisting of four CPE units (a total of 1200 clinical hours and 400 education hours).

**Moral Intelligence**

In section III of *With the Heart in Mind*, Shaykh Mikaeel presents "moral intelligence" as a balance to emotional and social intelligence. He defines moral intelligence as "the capacity to process moral information and to manage the self in a way that realizes the moral ideal" (p. 111). Elaborating on the statement widely attributed to Dostoyevsky, "If there is no God, everything is permissible," he explains that the "Islamic understanding of the *'aql* in relation to Allah's command is profound in that the authority of conscience depends on the Authority of Allah" (p. 115). In other words, the absence of God leads to moral relativity with no moral accountability. While emotional and social intelligence focus on the "messenger" and how the message is conveyed, moral intelligence focuses on the message itself and how the messenger aligns with the truth and values of that message (p. 111). Shaykh Mikaeel is calling on us to integrate together all of these forms of intelligence—emotional, social, and moral. He highlights the dangers of a robust emotional and social intelligence that lacks moral intelligence, referring to "moral blindness and weakness" when he writes that a "person may possess a working moral compass, but it is simply not calibrated to revelation. This leads to incorrect judgments and leads a person astray unknowingly" (pp. 128–129).

This is why in the multifaith settings where chaplains work, moral intelligence is necessary in order to serve all compassionately, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation, while also staying true to one's faith tradition. Shaykh Mikaeel describes five aspects of moral intelligence: 1) a moral compass "calibrated to the Prophetic ideals"; 2) conviction and commitment to following one's ideals; 3) moral sensitivity (the "ability to recognize right from wrong"); 4) moral problem solving (the "ability to apply moral reasoning to problems that arise in life"); and 5) moral assertiveness (the "courage to promote and defend which is right)" (p. 141). As Muslim chaplains navigate the public institutions where they serve, moral dilemmas present themselves in a variety of ways—

from requests for religious rituals to ethical decision making at the end of life. One example is that of requests from families to baptize their deceased baby or fetus. I can recall being the only chaplain overnight at a large hospital when I received news about a miscarriage. The nurse said that the parents were requesting for the dead fetus to be baptized. As I entered the room, the grief was silent and stifling. What do you say to comfort the parents of a deceased child?

When we apply Shaykh Mikaeel's moral intelligence from a Muslim chaplain perspective, we understand that having moral sensitivity includes emotional sensitivity, displaying empathy and compassion in supporting parents faced with loss and grief (p. 149). It also includes a sense of honesty and transparency to respect the faith tradition of the family as well as the chaplain's own faith tradition. The moral compass developed by Muslim chaplains through their faith, education, and training is rooted in the Qurʾān and Sunna, which is clear about *tawḥīd* (the complete oneness of God) and clearly expresses disagreement with the Christian Trinity (as shown in Qurʾān 4:171). Thus, choosing to baptize a child in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit would not be in line with the message of the Qurʾān or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, and would not be consistent with me holding on to my conviction and commitment as a Muslim chaplain. Moral problem solving in this situation includes considering not only my personal moral commitments, but also the *amāna* (trust and responsibility) I take on, as a staff chaplain, to facilitate the ritual needs of patients, families, and staff throughout the entire hospital. This requires that I make an effort to serve as a bridge to meet this family's spiritual needs in their time of intense grief.

There are multiple ways for a Muslim chaplain who finds himself or herself in such a situation to serve as this bridge, while still staying committed to his or her moral ideals. This may look like connecting the grieving parents to another chaplain or community clergy member, or inviting a Christian nurse to help do the ritual, while providing the elements needed. For me, moral assertiveness in this situation looked like compassionately informing the parents of my religious affiliation as a Muslim and that Christian clergy had informed me that in an emergency situation, any Christian can perform a baptism. In these cases, I have invited families—through compassion and empowering choice through options—to think on how special it might be for them or another family member to baptize their child, or for a Christian staff member to perform the baptism. This has often been met with appreciation from the parents, as they may not want someone who is not Christian to perform a religious ritual they hold sacred, and it gives them agency to make their own decision on the matter.

## Towards a Traditional Islamically Integrated Chaplaincy in North America

In one of my earliest chaplaincy courses on the basic listening and attending skills expected of chaplains, we covered books from Christian authors in the field of chaplaincy and pastoral theology, such as *Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor* by Emma J. Justes. In her book, she highlights Christian hospitality, invoking the "biblical images of hospitality for a theological grounding of the practice of listening" (Justes 2006, 1). Muslims and Christians share in common many of the biblical stories invoked by Justes,

such as the Prophet Lot (Lūṭ) and the "antihospitable attitude of the people of Sodom," as well as reference to Abraham and Sarah hosting strangers who turned out to be angels (Justes 2006, 8–11). She also makes references to a New Testament passage from the Gospel of Matthew (25:35–40) (Justes 2006, 7), which is very similar to the *ḥadīth qudsi*[3] where the Prophet Muhammad quotes God:

> Allah Almighty will say on the Day of Resurrection: "O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me." He [the person] will say: "My Lord, how can I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds?" Allah will say: "Did you not know that My servant was sick and you did not visit him, and had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food but you did not feed Me." He [the person] will say: "My Lord, how can I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds?" Allah will say: "Did you not know that My servant asked you for food but you did not feed him, and had you fed him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for drink but you did not provide for Me." He [the person] will say: "My Lord, how can I give You drink when You are the Lord of the worlds?" Allah will say: "My servant asked you for a drink but you did not provide for him, and had you given it to him you would have found Me with him." (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2569)

Muslim chaplaincy students, though presented with many helpful tools and perspectives on listening and hospitality within Justes's book, also face several challenges bringing the Islamic tradition into conversation with the book's contents. The passage from the Gospel of Matthew quoted by Justes ends with a statement from Jesus, who references the "king." This "king" says that when someone was fed, given drink, and visited, "Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, *you did it to me*." In contrast, the *ḥadīth qudsi* above instead quotes God at a future moment on the Day of Judgment, with no parable imagery. It offers an alternative message: "had you visited him" or "had you fed him" or "had you given [drink] to him, *you would have found Me with him*." These two views of similar passages are an example of how subtle differences highlight profound theological implications: the "King" (representing God the Father in this parable) in the Christian tradition is the *recipient* of the care we give; whereas in the Islamic tradition, God makes a distinction between the servant that was fed, given drink, or visited as the recipient and how God's *presence* in that moment was the blessing for the care provider.

It is in this vein that Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith's two books, *With the Heart in Mind* and *When Hearing Becomes Listening*, are a welcome addition to the professionalization of North American Islamic chaplaincy. In these works, he beautifully integrates the Arabic language and message of the Qurʾān through *tafsīr*, as well as the life biography of the Prophet Muhammad (Sīra) and his descriptions and characteristics (*shamāʾil*), with psychological and social science theories. Muslim chaplaincy students often need to translate Christian-rooted spiritual care books into concepts and parameters

[3] A category of narration of the Prophet Muhammad, in which he quotes God, but this quotation is not part of the Qurʾān.

from the Islamic tradition, in order to carve out spiritual care models and paradigms for themselves that are authentic to Islam while being accessible to humanity at large. Through their books, Christian authors provide pastoral and spiritual care models rooted in the social and behavioral sciences as well as their spiritual and religious traditions. Shaykh Mikaeel serves as an example of an Islamic scholar engaged in the same process. Clinical Pastoral Education programs with Muslim interns and residents would greatly benefit from CPE educators engaging with Shaykh Mikaeel's books as part of the development of their Muslim CPE students. In fact, there are some who wonder if Muslims should consider formulating a fully Islamically integrated CPE program, with curriculum that includes the kind of quality and vetted integration of the Islamic tradition with the psychological and social sciences that Shaykh Mikaeel demonstrates in his books. These books serve as a model for other Islamic scholars and Muslim chaplains to further explore areas of chaplaincy and spiritual self-reflection through an integration of academic theories with the Islamic tradition.

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**Sohaib Sultan. *An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching*. Revised by Martin Nguyen. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023.**

Reviewed by Abdul Muhaymin Priester, III*

Chaplain Sohaib Sultan (d. 2021), may Allah have mercy upon him, was the Muslim Life coordinator and chaplain at Princeton University for thirteen years before his passing. He graduated from the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Theological Seminary) with an MA in Islamic studies and a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy. This book, the updated and final result of his graduate thesis, is not just a scholarly work but rather a labor of love and a personal gift to preachers.

*An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching* (2023), Chaplain Sohaib's revised thesis, has been brought to us with the help of his friend and coauthor, Dr. Martin Nguyen. In it, they delve meaningfully into the art of homiletics. The book is meticulously structured into five chapters, each of which serves a distinct purpose, with a foreword, an introduction, a conclusion, an afterword, and an appendix that contains the *ad'iyā'* (supplications) of the female members of the community he served during his time at Princeton.

Nguyen's foreword highlights the book's purpose alongside the history of how they worked to bring it to fruition. He also delves into the *theology of the spoken word,* which highlights the value and longing we, as humans, have for and place in beautiful speech. In addition, he focuses on the Prophet's ﷺ Farewell Sermon and the poignant reminder it served in relation to the passing of Chaplain Sohaib, as well as its connection to the book's subject matter and serving of human spiritual and emotional needs.

The book's introduction focuses on two topics: the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon) and the *khaṭīb* (speaker who gives the sermon). Chaplain Sohaib sets the tone for discussing the need for meaningful and effective preaching from committed and qualified *khaṭīb*s. We have all experienced sermons that brought out an assortment of emotions—and for some, the emotions were mostly negative, with these sermons not allowing us to find the encouragement and peace we would expect to receive during our weekly worship. Chaplain Sohaib highlights five areas where the community's general criticism typically centers around the sermon's quality: a) irrelevant content, (b) impractical or extreme advice, (c) divisive, unnecessarily insensitive, and outright offensive language, (d) *khuṭba*s that lack organization, and (e) the *khaṭīb* being distracting due to demeanor, style, or gestures (p. 5).

In the section outlining the book's layout, he shares his six primary sources: the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, classical Islamic texts on the art of preaching, modern Muslim guides on the art of preaching, Christian works on homiletics, and his own vocational experience (pp.

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1–9). While some may object to his use of Christian writings on homiletics, Chaplain Sohaib shares that the universality of the practical method of preaching itself has "jewels of wisdom" (p. 8) that transcend religious affiliation.

Chapter 1 discusses the purpose of preaching and highlights its different types. He starts by noting the importance of language and the preacher's duty to ask himself about the roles and purposes (*maqāṣid*) of preaching. In this, he shares a very relevant point about the need to ask "what Islamic preaching in the twenty-first century means and entails" while emphasizing the *jumu'a khuṭba* (p. 12).

The author then presents his formulations of the various types of preaching based on their audiences and circumstances: spiritual, teaching, counseling, and social. He describes spiritual preaching as "inspiring awe of God, love for good works, and attention to the Hereafter" (p. 12). A very relevant reflection he shares is his view that this type of preaching is at the heart of Islamic preaching in America today:

> The reality of the situation is that we live in an age of skepticism and relativism in which we are expected to question and doubt everything, including our central beliefs and core values. Furthermore, American Muslims live in a religiously diverse society in which many religious beliefs and practices invite questions from fellow friends, neighbors, coworkers, and classmates. As such, it is as important for the American khaṭīb to educate and inform as it is to inspire and exhort. (p. 15)

Chaplain Sohaib describes teaching-preaching as "teaching and guiding people to the way of Islam," building on the need to "teach people about the inner and outer aspects of the religion and guiding them to the way of truth" (p. 16). He defines counseling preaching as "healing hearts and giving sincere advice" (p. 19). The objective and tone of these types of sermons are designed to heal human hearts or offer nurturing advice. Chaplain Sohaib highlights two famous ḥadīth: *al-dīn al-naṣīḥa* (the religion is sincere advice) (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 55a) and "you will not have (complete) faith until you want for your brother what you want for yourself" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 13).

The chapter ends with his thoughts on social preaching, which he describes as "calling to social goodness, peace, and justice" (pg. 21). He shares how this type of preaching is not discussed in classical Islamic books but is commonly dealt with in more contemporary ones. On reflection, thinking about how we separate the different spheres of life and human interaction in more recent times, it makes sense that there is no specific mention of these issues in the classical texts. It would have been interesting if the author had looked at places where the Prophet ﷺ discussed matters we classify as social issues and see what the classical texts and commentaries said about them in comparison to how they are discussed today. I believe this would have added additional depth to the topic.

Chapter 2, which I consider one of the most critical chapters, is on the preacher's life and character. Whether we cook food, drink water, or put things in storage, a pot, cup, or container, whatever we use to facilitate achieving our goal must be clean and free from defects, even more so for the one who conveys the message of Allah ﷻ and His Rasūl ﷺ. Chaplain Sohaib provides an excellent quote from Shaykh Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), highlighting the reality of a preacher's life:

> Only the learned man (ʿālim) who is firmly rooted in all the branches of knowledge should narrate stories (yaquṣṣu) [or preach], for he will be asked to discourse in each of these fields. The jurisconsult (faqīh) is scarcely even questioned about matters relating to the science of tradition when he conducts a course in law, nor is the expert in tradition (muḥaddith) very often asked about matters relating to law. The preacher (wāʿiẓ), on the other hand, is questioned concerning every field of knowledge. For this reason it is necessary to be a perfectly learned man… All of the preceding qualifications, however, hinge upon fear (taqwā) of God, for the impact of [the preacher's] words will be in direct relation to his fear of God. One of the pious men of old once said: "Whenever exhortation issues from the heart of an upright man it makes an impression on the hearts of those who hear it. This proves that his intention is pure, for when his intention is pure God causes the people to respond to him and eradicates from his heart any desire for their wealth. (p. 26)

After that, he discusses the characteristics that the preacher must possess, such as truthfulness (*ṣidq*), courage (*shajāʿa*), wisdom (*ḥikma*), patience (*ṣabr*), compassion and love (*raḥma wa mawadda*), humility (*tawāḍuʾ*), and modesty (*ḥayāʾ*). These beautiful qualities we all make an effort to possess, but those who call us to Allah and His Rasūl ﷺ and remind us of our duty in this life and our judgment in the next should make an extra effort to exude these characteristics.

In Chapter 3, which is the longest one, Chaplain Sohaib, may Allah have mercy on him, goes through the steps required to prepare and deliver a good sermon. As with all things we seek to master, public speaking and writing have steps we should mimic for us to function at the level of other highly effective communicators. In the closing section, he shares a good reminder that the steps that go into preparing the weekly sermon should be an ongoing process which repeats itself at the beginning of each week. While life and circumstances often cause us to get sidetracked during the week, we should consistently work to be in a constant state of writing and reflection when we are responsible for delivering the *khuṭba* each week.

Chapter 4 highlights the mindset and logistics of delivering the sermon. In these pages, Chaplain Sohaib covers some obvious but crucial points that would allow our sermons to have the most meaningful impact. He covers such subjects as preparing to preach with spiritual confidence, turning the written word into spoken art, preaching with style, overcoming obstacles to good preaching, ethics of the pulpit, and the evaluation process. I found the sections on spiritual confidence, ethics of the pulpit, and the evaluation process to be the most thoughtful and vital topics he covered. Far too often, a *khaṭīb* may fall short in understanding how to act on these areas of concern, and Chaplain Sohaib does an excellent job of sharing points of great benefit.

Chapter 5, the final part of Chaplain Sohaib's work, is the one that most people will have the greatest hesitation towards or the largest number of questions about, as he covers the matter of women and the *jumuʿa* prayer. This is the lightest chapter in terms of the amount of content, but the subject's gravity makes it very profound. The value and importance of women cannot be quantified or qualified; it is beyond measure. However,

when addressing the issue of how and when women interact with the prayer and prayer spaces, we must do our best not to minimize or remove their bodies or voices. Chaplain Sohaib goes through how he worked to address all of the relevant arguments and concerns surrounding women having some active participation in the *jumu'a* prayer. His solution was to allow them to make *du'ā'* after *jumu'a* publicly in front of the congregation. While I believe that the solution implemented by Chaplain Sohaib was a novel approach, it also carries the question of whether this was the most ideal or appropriate solution to addressing the petitioners' and the community's needs.

While his final decision safeguarded the actual prayer, some of his discussion regarding the arguments and wants of segments of the American Muslim community need to be addressed point by point to allow for a holistic response to the wants, needs, and expectations of American Muslims. His conclusion covers ways to move forward by cultivating the preaching skills of promising and experienced preachers and by developing both the right resources *and* the mindset of thinking globally and acting locally.

Nguyen shares some moving final thoughts on his friend and coauthor that give the book a fitting ending of closing where it started: paying homage to his beloved friend. The poignancy of these closing reflections bring us back to how Chaplain Sohaib's choice of words in his first chapter reminds us of the power of speech when he said,

> Speech allows human beings to communicate with one another in the most sophisticated, complex, and intelligible of ways. Indeed, the ability to articulate our ideas and experiences is nothing other than a divine gift of the highest magnitude. As God, exalted is He, says in Sūrat al-Raḥmān, "The Merciful One, who taught the Qur'an, created the human being, and taught them intelligent speech." (Q. 55:1–4) (p. 11)

An excellent complement to the book was the appendix, where Chaplain Sohaib shares the actual *ad'iyā'* (supplications) of his congregation's women after the *jumu'a* prayer.

This book is a beautiful contribution to the art of preaching from a revered, missed, and beloved man of God. It serves as an excellent reference for our religious leaders to cultivate and beautify the speech of humans to present the speech of our Most Glorious and Generous Lord, *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*.

## Omar Imady. *Divine Pronouns: Unlocking the Definitive Quran: Part 1: Principles*. Monee, Illinois: Self-published, 2024.

Reviewed by Nosheen Khan

> Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them [first], [if they persist,] do not share their beds, [but if they still persist,] then strike them [gently]. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great. (Qurʾān 4:34, trans. *The Clear Quran*)

Qurʾānic chapter Al-Nisā verse 34 is considered one of the most highly scrutinized verses from the Qurʾān. Contemporary Muslim women's status in Islam seems to have been reduced to a few critical matters: the veil, polygamy, and a few Qurʾānic verses that are believed to stipulate female subordination to men. The range of ways in which its key provisions have been interpreted illustrates to many a presence of androcentrism and misogyny in some aspects of the Muslim tradition. At the same time, egalitarian readings of scripture have not been satisfyingly able to explain away the undeniable fact that the literal meaning of the word "*ḍaraba*" from the verse is to hit, unless it is completely ignored or denied (pp. 4–6).

In *Divine Pronouns* (2024), Omar Imady introduces a new hermeneutical system for interpreting these uncomfortably sensitive verses without disregarding or rejecting them, a system which is "based on internal mechanisms and features of the Quran itself" (p. 8). He contends that the "principle underlying such context-bound verses should be identified and used as a foundation for discerning the ethical philosophy of the Quran; more specifically, distinguishing between what the Quran aspires to achieve and the context in which it was interacting" (p. 7). Imady proposes an original method in which the presence or absence of a divine pronoun and its type for each verse should be determined before realizing the verse's meaning and significance for law-making.

This book is exceptionally well written and is an undeniably important resource for anyone in pastoral care. Imady clarifies most of the Arabic terminology used in the book but does not do so in a few places, which may leave some readers desiring a more comprehensive explanation. The text is very well referenced and cited, reflecting a high level of academic rigor. It is targeted towards academics interested in Islamic studies, pastoral care providers, women and gender justice advocates, and anyone interested in a better understanding of the Qurʾān, notably those who feel alienated by their faith and/or communities. Some readers may find the technical discussion in Imady's methodology to be a bit challenging to understand, especially those without an Arabic (p. 25) or linguistic background. Despite this, the book's innovative hermeneutical framework is a valuable contribution to Qurʾānic interpretation and studies. The text spans almost 100 pages and

includes a preface, five chapters with subsections, a conclusion, appendices, and endnotes. However, the actual reading content is spread over about 72 pages, making it a concise read.

Omar Imady, an author of books on Syria and Islam, is an award-winning novelist and poet. He holds a BA in Islam and Middle Eastern studies from Macalester College and an MA and PhD in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Additionally, he studied under Sheikh Muhammad Bashir al-Bani, a distinguished Syrian Muslim scholar, judge, and Islamic Studies professor. Imady grabs the reader's attention from the very first page. He describes the intent of the book in the introduction and summarizes the modern and traditional Qurʾānic exegetical methods and approaches (pp. 2–16), while building a case for a new hermeneutical approach located from within the Qurʾānic textual mechanism—his novel approach for Qurʾānic interpretation.

Imady notes untenable statistical trends and broader societal concerns to highlight the real-world consequences of a perceived disconnection between the Qurʾān's teachings and modern sensibilities to reinforce the urgency of his method to help restore trust through a fresh and relatable way to engage with the Qurʾān while preserving its sacredness (pp. 2–8). He reasons that at the core of these trends and those leaving the faith is the increasing dissatisfaction and "a sense of alienation, not just from the Muslim communities but also from the sacred text that appears to be increasingly at odds with the current sensibilities, ethics, and principles" (p. 3). In a world where gender equality is increasingly recognized, the importance of this issue cannot be overstated. Imady uses verse 4:34 as an example to explain his methodology. However, he maintains that the same method can be utilized for other disputed and sensitive verses, such as "implementation of crucifixion and amputation as a form of legal justice (5:33)" (p. 3). Therefore, his method is a long-overdue and crucial framework to explain these verses, a framework that resonates with modern readers without compromising the eternalness or sacredness of the Qurʾān.

In comparison to classical exegetical works, which mainly relied upon interpretations of the Qurʾān by the Qurʾān, Prophetic Sunna, explanations and opinions of his companions and their successors (the *tābiʿīn*), among other things, Imady's goal is to establish a "first complete classification of the Quran according to the pre-existing categories existing within the text itself" (p. 1).

Imady adopts a layered approach for his methodology to create a Qurʾān-based classification system. Through a rigorous reading of the Arabic Qurʾān, he focuses on three aspects: 1) how the divine voice is employed throughout the Qurʾānic text (its presence or absence); 2) the target audience (specifically, if it is clearly defined, the Prophet, or general); and 3) rulings (whether the content was prescriptive or not while making a note of its place of revelation). Through his intensive study, Imady discovered that the divine voice in the first person—the "I" and "We" pronouns—appears in 1268 verses, accounting for 20.3% (p. 34) of the entire Qurʾān. Notably, 1061 (p. 39) of these verses had been revealed in the Meccan time frame. Imady concludes from his extensive breakdown that "none of the 1268 Divine first-person verses included rulings related to marriage, divorce, the relationship between the sexes, or punishments of any type" (p. 48).

The absence or presence of divine pronouns is both purposeful and significant and therefore can serve as an essential tool for pastoral caregivers to transform potentially

divisive verses into opportunities for spiritual growth, healing, and reaffirmation of faith. The absence of the divine first person voice does not diminish the value of the verse; rather, it may allow for its reading, understanding, and implementation from a different light, leading to uncovering the true intent of these verses rather than taking them to be unequivocal in both wording and command.

In verse 4:34, the absence of a divine voice, according to Imady, means that "it does not contain a timeless imperative at all; this verse represents a part of a strategy to move society away from the unethical practices towards behavior consistent with a divine system of beliefs and ethics" (p. 70). By emphasizing context-sensitive interpretation, as hitting wives was a predominant feature of seventh-century Arabia, this framework helps pastoral caregivers explain this verse and many others like it specific to historical circumstances without undermining their spiritual relevance. Imady's attempt is a nuanced approach that establishes a principle leading a reader to conclude that traditional methods and interpretations should not always be regarded as the definitive and best interpretation of the fundamentals of Islam. Rather than understanding where the Qurʾānic verses wanted us to reach—equity and mercy—traditionally, the wording of these verses where "I" or "We" pronouns are missing was assumed as a conclusive terminus, even when the rules derived from these verses contradicted the spirit of the Prophetic example, which stood against violence against women, slavery, and injustice. Imady's system should be taken in addition to the traditional scholarship engaging with the dynamics of the particular eras and not necessarily critiquing those methods.

Imady argues that in verses where the divine "I" or "We" pronouns are used, the Qurʾān is saying exactly what it is trying to achieve. The absence of the divine voice is the key to the context here (p. 69–72). Again, in this verse, the "I" and "We" pronouns are absent, and it is not directed towards the Prophet. Therefore, the essential objective and principle of this verse is to discourage domestic violence. Had verse 4:34 been in the "I" or "We" pronoun, it would have changed everything. But it is not, and nor are many similar verses; therefore, these verses must be contextualized and have underlying universal principles, essential meanings, and implications that must be identified and adhered to.

While this book is an excellent first step and very insightful and original, it may still be considered subjective and open to various interpretations and disagreements by others as it may lead to interpretations that can challenge all of the traditional exegetical corpus. Focusing exclusively on divine pronouns may confine the scope of understanding and overlook other significant linguistic and contextual clues within the Qurʾānic text. Thus, a more in-depth analysis of the many other verses, such as Qurʾān 11:114 and 4:103, where prayer is mandated but "He," "I," and "We" pronouns are missing, in addition to the interpretively sensitive verses, with a more robust interdisciplinary dialogue with scholars of linguistics, history, and other relevant disciplines, needs to be done to further support the book's claims. Imady uses chapter Al-Nisā as the case study and notes that only 18.2% of the verses within this Qurʾānic chapter are in the first person voice (p. 41). However, he does not break the rest of these verses down, utilizing his three-layered methodology for a more in-depth analysis to further strengthen his approach.

Interpretively complex verses and sensitive passages such as verse 4:34 have troubled many hearts over time and may do so in the future as well. Imady believes all of

the Qurʾān is mandatory, no doubt. However, his methodology suggests that these certain verses are meant to be instructive (providing guidance or moral lessons) and not so much prescriptive (mandating specific actions or behaviors). By analyzing the use of divine pronouns, Imady therefore offers insights into the intended application of these verses, which can be particularly beneficial in pastoral care settings to address doubts and concerns. The way Islam is presented at times can make or break the faith for many. This understanding can bring peace to those who identify with Islam's eternal beauty and commitment to justice. Shifts between "We," "I," and "He" in verses about women might reveal nuances in divine compassion, empowerment, and justice, as the absence or presence of these pronouns is intentional and divinely momentous. This book is a must-read, and I am eagerly awaiting the next releases in the series.

## Karen A. McClintock. *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022.

Reviewed by Saira Qureshi*

Karen McClintock's book, *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care* (2022), is filled with multiple important topics which address how contemporary trauma-informed pastoral care is offered to clients who have experienced various traumas and need initial and ongoing psychospiritual support and treatment.

The eleven chapters offer significant insights based on the author's clinical work with clients as they benefit from what she calls a "Trauma-Informed Adaptive Model" in pastoral care. The book has a prologue, acknowledgements, and an index. Each chapter offers a substantial review of specific risk as well as protective factors as they may impact the person during and after traumatic experiences. She shares that the grief that comes after these ordeals can be manifested as *prolonged* and as *delayed mourning.* Furthermore, the author highlights many ways in which traumatic grief affects people and how individuals and systems respond to such experiences. She underscores the significance of appreciating cultural considerations as well as the roles of the clergy, congregation, and community engagement in offering supportive treatment to these patients.

An important aspect of this book and the author's writing style is that she covers a wide range of topics, among them trauma due to natural disasters or the violence of wars and racial violence, as well as secondary and transgenerational trauma—while still keeping it relevant to the book's overarching theme. She emphasizes the need for acknowledging silence and calls for repair when traumatic experiences occur in a transgenerational context.

Each chapter presents a case example and a question in which the author asks, "*What is going on here?*" This format provides related example cases for her recommendations of offering good pastoral care following best practices and how to avoid harming clients during treatment.

In chapter 1, the growing need for trauma-informed pastoral care is identified using multiple anecdotal examples of the tragedies people have gone through, leading them to need supportive, psychospiritual specialized care. She weaves in several coping strategies, such as deep breathing as a grounding exercise, offers how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted people and added to their stressors, and how pandemic-related trauma became yet another diagnosable category of conditions needing supportive pastoral care, including the traumatization effect of learning about other people's traumatic pandemic experiences and losses. The author appreciates the clergy's role in treating patients during the pandemic and offers an overview of what their treatment would look like as healing begins—thereby, inviting readers to "recognize trauma symptoms in yourself and others, along with ways to foster healing from trauma" (p. 11).

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In chapter 2, the author mentions The Adaptive Model and reviews its Rs which those offering pastoral care must practice: *realizing* trauma's impact on the patient, *recognizing* its signs and symptoms, *responding* with support and supportive services, *resisting* biased judgments that may add to the patient's pain through *re-traumatization*, and *relationality or reconnecting*, where "a spiritual director helps to *restore* the broken spiritual bond" (p. 22).

In chapter 3, McClintock describes the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and underlying childhood traumas, along with family trauma, adverse childhood events (ACEs), and the role of epigenetics in terms of trauma healing and resilience, highlighting the role of environmental conditions, and the biological and neurological implications from trauma experiences. The author further elaborates on these experiences' transgenerational effects and their long-term influence, as she mentions *post traumatic slave syndrome* (p. 29), a term
first used in 2005 by sociologist Joy DeGruy.

While appreciating the trauma that clients face while recovering from their ordeals, McClintock also presents the *individual trauma* that care providers may undergo as they provide support, and she explores why it is essential to process these feelings "to improve your pastoral care" (p. 30). Here, she suggests breathing exercises for care providers and reminds readers not to allow their own trauma experiences to overtake or interfere with meeting the clients' treatment needs. The author gives readers a succinct list of guidelines for trauma-informed therapists, noting that the therapeutic relationship must be based on compassion and acceptance; that clients are assessed properly for signs of avoidance, shame, or disassociation, normalization of trauma-related symptoms; and that such information is presented while helping clients with negative self-talk believe that a full recovery is achievable (p. 31). After warning about trauma transference or emotional entanglement with the patient, McClintock recommends that providers use heuristics to discover their own trauma experiences and to be aware of and address their symptoms to prevent their trauma from affecting their clinical work.

She also suggests making trauma lists and being able to identify PTSD symptoms in adults (e.g., intrusion, avoidance, negative mood and cognition, and changes in arousal and reactivity as noted in the DSM-5). In addition, she reorients the reader to the differences individuals may have in coping with and healing from traumatic experiences. She recommends keeping in mind pretrauma factors, such as gender, race, socioeconomic class differences, differences in developmental stages, and preexisting mental health issues. Towards the end of chapter 3, the author gently reminds readers to have compassion, given the responsibility of offering a faith-based viewpoint to clients, and to "use your own words, but whatever you do, offer them grace" (p. 41).

Chapter 4 is about traumatic grief in its prolonged and delayed mourning phases. McClintock provides anecdotes and her observations of others' experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic years. She asserts that traumatic grief can be taxing on multiple levels and recommends that readers engage in breathing exercises before reading these pages. In particular, the author lists people's disproportionate suffering during the pandemic as one factor that further exacerbated their traumatic experiences of illness and personal loss which occurred because of it. Presenting a case of gender difference between

women and men when faced with trauma experiences, she states that women tend to garner more social support, whereas men tend to suffer alone. Here, the author references research on holding hands, or the positive impact of human touch, when people are traumatically stressed, as she delves deeper into these events' effect on the posttraumatic stress phase, giving examples of hospital staff (e.g., nurses, doctors, and chaplains), as they were determined to help everyone—patients, their families, and staff.

To address an intense set of debilitating symptoms—from shock to suicidality—the author emphasizes the ever-needed appropriate mental health services, and she notes that many people decided to leave the healthcare field because of immense stress from the pandemic's traumatic conditions. She proposes for the reader to hear survivors' stories and to share them, as doing so can help providers and patients alike process losses and give due space for expressions of gratitude, realization for the need of closer bonds, and healing from grief. To that point, she writes, "Grief connects us to one another and honors the depth of pain we justifiably feel after each goodbye" (p. 53).

Additionally, McClintock provides her assessment of a preliminary study on COVID-19-related survey responses, which was published in the *Journal of Loss and Trauma*.[1] In her analysis, she indicates hope that people could report their symptoms accurately, noting that even small uplifting memories can help individuals gradually heal from intense trauma. The most important point the author makes at the end of chapter 4 is the link between people having strong ties in faith communities and the ability to "build trust and bond during trauma grief recovery" (p. 53).

Chapter 5 offers cultural considerations regarding grief recovery in pastoral care with individual clients, families, and congregations. McClintock focuses on building relational connections while offering safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment voice and choice, as well as appropriately addressing cultural, historical, and gender related aspects. The author also offers helpful insights here about how best to aid people in healing by adapting *the transitional objects* term (from Donald Winnicott's work with children)[2] for healing providers. She uses the neuroscience concept of mirror neurons and underscores the importance of healing rituals and one's listening presence on the path of healing from grief.

Chapter 6 deals with helping people who have suffered trauma and loss from natural disasters. McClintock gives clear examples of how such trauma can have multiple layers of loss that need to be recognized, and she demonstrates how to help people heal from each of these layers with the aid of *tender touch* to calm one's own anxiousness. She then

[1] See Matthew Gallagher, et al., "Examining Associations Between COVID-19 Experiences and Posttraumatic Stress," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 26, no. 8 (2021): 752 –766.

[2] According to Clare Wakenshaw: "A transitional object was identified as a material object, for example a teddy bear or doll, used by infants and young children for comfort and the reduction of anxiety, which allowed them security when exploring further from their primary attachment figure… In his clinical work, Winnicott observed that young children experienced an almost addictive attachment to these physical objects and that the object became essential to the child in order to comfort them in times of temporary separation from their attachment figure, for example at bedtimes… A transitional object is seen by Winnicott as a way infants can transition successfully from their separate individual identity to forming healthy relationships with others." From Clare Wakenshaw, "The use of Winnicott's concept of transitional objects in bereavement practice," *Bereavement Care* 39, no. 3 (2020): 119–123.

proposes that professional care should feel, as her colleague once said, "competent and confident" (p. 74), recognizing that in emergent situations such as natural disasters, often not everyone is prepared, even as trained professionals, to manage all manners of trauma responses. She gives some pointers as starting places to help in such scenarios and also provides ways to avoid harm (pp. 78–79).

In chapter 7, the author discusses how to respond to racial violence, and highlights the effects of ingrained fear that take hold as well as the reawakened trauma (pp. 98–99). She then guides the reader towards starting with faith communities and being ready to learn about racial traumatic experiences openly, saying, "let the trauma teach us" (p. 104). McClintock encourages readers to be aware of their own biases and to check one's own racial vocabulary.

In chapter 8, the author addresses secondary trauma and, like she does throughout the book, looks towards prophetic examples of setting up social justice as a norm as well as intentionally stepping in to help others "heal their suffering" (p. 107). In this chapter, she reminds the reader of the secondary trauma symptoms: reexperiencing, avoidance/numbing, and persistent arousal (p. 109). Later in this chapter, McClintock emphasizes the essence of what doing effective work in "reducing trauma impact" (p. 109) entails, by using a list of ten self-care tips (pp. 110–111; borrowed from Pastor Emily D. Scott). She also offers methods in "healing past traumatic wounds" through somatic treatment modalities such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, Biofeedback, the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), and the Polyvagal Theory (PVT) to release somatic memory. The author recommends that readers check their pulse and lower their heart rate through deep breathing to get a taste of what it may be like to experience somatic treatments.

In chapter 9, she presents transgenerational trauma healing approaches, related by overcoming silence and shame, and being ready to process "pain: yours, mine, ours" (p. 129). McClintock offers a very deep insight here, stating that, "Coming to grips with the real past enables us to look at today quite differently" (p. 129). She encourages readers to engage in "releasing" trauma feelings by breathing again and paying attention to the calming effect in "connecting the past to the present" (p. 137).

The last two chapters offer a great summary for "spiritual care through a trauma lens" via the divinely granted tools of prayers and scripture, as having been found to be very beneficial in addressing the denial of trauma and resultant weakening of faith. She shares her perspective that clients who are open to spirituality can find hope in getting insight into their existential questions. Chapter 11, the final chapter, overviews the trauma recovery stages of victim, to survivor, to transformation (pp. 155–169).

Overall, this book lends an in-depth overview of trauma-informed pastoral care across spiritual and clinical healing settings. It would have been great to include a comparison of different faith healing practices in a table format with examples of cases in which clients demonstrate a progression in their spiritual evolution towards healing while working through therapeutic treatment for processing their traumatic experiences. Other than this, this book is valuable in introducing graduate students, in particular, to the practices of pastoral counseling, chaplaincy, and psychospiritual training programs.

Muslim chaplains would benefit from supplementing this reading with resources which address trauma from an Islamic perspective, such as *Your Lord Has Not Forsaken You: Addressing the Impact of Trauma on Faith* by Najwa Awad and Sarah Sultan (Yaqeen Institute, 2022 and Kube Publishing, 2023), *Healing Possibilities: 365 Tools to Consider* by Dr. Omar Reda (2025), *Clinical Applications of Islamic Psychology* edited by Dr. Amber Haque and Dr. Abdallah Rothman (IAIP Publishing, 2023), and Jacob Bentley and his team's work on Islamic Trauma Healing,[3] as well as resources on the Islamic wisdoms behind trials and tribulations and how to heal from them, such as *The Prick of a Thorn: Coping with the Trials and Tribulations of Life* by Dr. Aisha Utz (International Islamic Publishing House, 2014).

[3] See Jacob Bentley, et al., "Islamic Trauma Healing: Integrating Faith and Empirically Supported Principles in a Community-Based Program," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 28, no. 2 (2021):167–192; as well as Lori Zoellner, et al., "Islamic Trauma Healing (ITH): A Scalable, Community-Based Program for Trauma: Cluster Randomized Control Trial Design and Method," *Contemporary Clinical Trials Communications* 37 (2024): 101237. A brief outlining the program they developed is available at https://www.elrha.org/researchdatabase/islamic-trauma-healing-brief/.

# The Association of Muslim Chaplains Annual Conference 2025: *Re-Member, Reflect, and Reimagine*

Jaye Starr*

The Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC) convened their annual virtual conference, *Re-Member, Reflect, and Reimagine*, on February 14 to 16, 2025 via Zoom. The program was split into two parts: the first was a set of parallel training sessions intended to help the different fields of chaplains reconnect with one another while exploring a specific topic of relevance, the second part was an opportunity to virtually sit at the feet of elders to learn from some of the earliest Muslim chaplains in the field and gather to hear from those who are thinking about the future of Muslims in each sub-field within Islamic chaplaincy. It was preceded by a casual in-gathering on Friday evening which attempted to recreate virtually the experience of arriving at a conference hotel lobby and reconnecting with old friends while meeting new ones. This was achieved through a collection of small group breakouts with reflective questions such as: *What was a "rose" and a "thorn" from your past year? What led you to chaplaincy and what has kept you here? What is something from the Prophetic tradition that informs your chaplaincy and what is something from contemporary culture that does the same?* Rooms mixed long serving chaplains with those new to the field and included students in their midst.

Topics for Saturday's training included "Navigating Salafism in Prison" (Dr. Faizudeen Shuaib), "Critical Anti-Islamophobia for Muslim Campus Chaplains" (Margari Hill of MuslimARC), "Understanding and Responding to Trauma Through Islamic Psychotherapy" (Maryam Fakhruddin), and "Engaging with Narcissism: Supporting Families & Communities" (Azleena Salleh Azhar). Additionally, a four-part series was provided on *fiqh* related to medical care that included two sessions on Sunni rulings—one for general medical topics ('Asma Binti Hasanuddin) and one around end-of-life rulings (Yunus Dadhwala)—a session looking at convergences and divergences for Shia rulings on the same topics (Narjess Kardan), and a concluding session on talking to patients and families who "want everything done" (Ayman Soliman). The longer three-hour format that was employed allowed for an important depth of learning and discussion. Feedback was positive, especially in relationship to the case studies and sharing of experiences by the participants in the various trainings. There were some concerns expressed by several healthcare chaplains who were distressed about the emphasis on *fiqh,* given its limited role in the work performed by most of the cohort members.

Dr. Ingrid Mattson's keynote set the stage for the next day: looking at the past and envisioning the future. She began by centering the experiences of early Black Muslim chaplains doing the work primarily in corrections institutions without the benefit of training, thus reminding attendees that the need for Muslim chaplains was born out of anti-

* Jaye Starr is a graduate of Hartford International University's Islamic Chaplaincy program, a healthcare chaplain in the Midwest, and a member of the Association of Muslim Chaplains' board.

Black racism in America that has fueled mass incarceration. She encouraged the audience to learn from each other across sectors of chaplaincy and especially from African Americans who came first, many of whom have faced obstacles similar to what education chaplains are currently facing. Dr. Mattson concluded by sharing the ways her work with the Hurma Project has advanced her understanding of the mechanisms of spiritual abuse as well as the protective steps that can be taken to ensure that chaplaincy is not tarnished by such injustices.

On Sunday, we gathered to hear from some of the earliest chaplains in each cohort with a session series called "Remember our Roots." These sessions ran concurrently and varied significantly between cohorts, with military chaplains (Capt. Ryan Carter, Capt. Barbara Helms, Dr. Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad, and Col. Dr. Khallid Shabazz) sharing personal stories from operations and deployment experiences, and community chaplains (Dr. Nurah Amat'ullah, Rabia Terri Harris, Dr. Muhammad Hatim) likewise sharing stories from the early days before Muslims were familiar with the title "chaplain," as well as reflecting on the experience of being Muslim women in leadership roles. The healthcare chaplaincy session (led by Zilfa Baksh, Yusuf Hasan, and Dr. Abdus-Salaam Musa) was observed to be at times a little more akin to a *khātira* extolling the virtues of chaplaincy work while also sharing stories from the various times that individuals have stepped in to fill critical urgent needs for the Muslim community that then blossomed into more comprehensive spiritual care for all. The corrections chaplaincy session (presented by Abu Ishaq Abdul Hafiz, Jenanah Amatullah-Muqsit ESQ, Wynona Majied-Mohammad, Oliver Muhammad, and Dr. Salahuddin M. Muhammad) discussed the ways in which Black chaplains, particularly those with the WD Mohammed community, were integral to doing the early work and developing the field of Islamic chaplaincy—which they did with deep sincerity and love, often as volunteers without the benefit of formal training. Education chaplain Omer Bajwa spoke solo as the other discussants (Marwa Aly, Dr. Bilal Ansari, and Amira Quraishi) had last minute cancellations. His session examined the emergence and development of Muslim chaplaincy post-9/11 and the ways it continues to navigate contemporary campuses' cultural, political, and religious realities.

The conference then transitioned to a session series titled "Envisioning our Future." The two foundational questions framing this series were: Where would you like to see Muslims in this field 25 years from now; and what steps need to be taken to get there? This set was followed by a cohort working group session, with each group focused on a different need.

The corrections chaplains (Muhammad Ali, Mustafa Boz, Hajjah Sabah Muhammad-Tahir, and Zubair Yousif) discussed the critical role of having a strong foundation of Islamic sciences combined with a deep understanding of the history and lived experiences of Black people, as well as the need for love, respect, listening skills, and trauma-informed care knowledge.

The community chaplaincy cohort (facilitated by Ibrahim Long, Lauren Schreiber, and Hanaa Unus) talked about, and subsequently worked on, the development of accountability mechanisms that could be applicable across the diversity of their work (i.e., for a chaplain who may be running a private practice, to those working in the masjid or serving on a volunteer basis with a community organization). The education cohort (led by

Tahera Ahmed, Patricia Anton, Kaiser Aslan, and Dr. Joshua Salaam) explored the recent challenges that they've faced post-Oct. 7th and thought about how independently structured chaplaincies might provide benefits and challenges to chaplains. Their working groups discussed the diagnosis of Islamophobia on campuses, documentation of harms experienced by chaplains or students, and how to engage in national advocacy more broadly.

Military chaplains (Maj. Rafael Lantigua, Capt. Ryan Carter, and Col. Ibraheem Raheem) focused on deployment support needs and thinking about how to best meet the needs of a cohort that struggles to be able to gather for huddles, given time changes and security measures on bases. Healthcare chaplaincy (led by Sondos Kholaki, Ayman Soliman, and Taqwa Surapati) discussed what it looks like to continue with service rooted in our tradition, following the Qurʾān and Sunna. They expressed the hope that chaplains can grow in their skills, interventions, community impact, and engagement with evidence-based research and reflection, including the development of research specific to Islamic chaplaincy.

The conference concluded with cyber security training provided by Praveen Sinha from Equality Labs. Although an intense way to wrap up, it provided attendees with important knowledge to protect themselves from doxxing, data hackers, and surveillance by government and non-government actors.

The conference was accompanied by an artfully designed program book thanks to Seher Siddiqee and Usama Malik. In addition to advertisements from sponsors, session information, and biographical information for the speakers and hosts, it also contained an extensive collection of photos from the past fifteen years of AMC's work. In addition to making recordings available to members, AMC maintains conference program books on the website so that those researching Muslim chaplains, as well as members who missed the program, can learn more about the conversations that are being had in AMC spaces.

The conference was chaired by Jaye Starr with communications and tech support from Usama Malik and speaker coordination assistance from Rasheed Rabbi. AMC's operations manager, Karim Hakim, provided critical tech support during the conference. All in all, it was a success, with 194 attendees participating, and an average of nearly 9 hours of participation. However, many only participated in one or two sessions and the number of cameras turned off would suggest that many who were in attendance were multi-tasking. The conference committee was left feeling that to truly advance the field of Islamic chaplaincy, future conferences require an in-person focus, in no small part because the side conversations that happen are often as important as the sessions themselves, but also because speakers can't build on other sessions if they only attend their own.

# Integrating Muslim Spirituality and Cultural Care in Clinical Settings

Gulsen Cok*

*This research brief outlines the findings of a thesis that was completed in 2025 for the degree of Master of Arts in Public and Pastoral Leadership (specialization in Spiritual Care) at the Vancouver School of Theology.*

This thesis explores the integration of Islamic spiritual and cultural care within Western healthcare systems, emphasizing the importance of addressing the unique needs of Muslim patients. The author argues that as healthcare systems become increasingly diverse, accommodating the spiritual and cultural practices of Muslim patients is essential for providing holistic and compassionate care. The paper draws on Islamic teachings, psychological theories, and real-world examples to highlight the challenges and opportunities in integrating Islamic spiritual care into clinical settings. There are five key themes and arguments.

## Understanding Spirituality in Islam

The thesis begins by defining spirituality, tracing its origins from the Latin word *spiritus* (breath) and its evolution across religious and secular contexts. In Islam, spirituality (*rūḥaniyya*) is deeply tied to the soul (*rūḥ*), which is considered an immortal aspect of human existence. The soul's well-being is believed to influence physical health, and Islamic spirituality emphasizes a harmonious relationship between the body and spirit. Core concepts like *imān* (faith), *islām* (wholeness), and *taqwā* (piety) underscore the importance of spiritual integrity and alignment with divine guidance.

## The Role of Muslim Chaplains in Healthcare

Muslim chaplains play a critical role in bridging the gap between healthcare providers and Muslim patients. They provide spiritual guidance, facilitate religious rituals, and advocate for patients' cultural and religious needs. For example, they help patients navigate ethical dilemmas, such as end-of-life decisions, organ donation, and fasting during Ramadan. Muslim chaplains also educate hospital staff about Islamic practices, such as modesty requirements, dietary restrictions, and the importance of same-gender care providers. Their presence ensures that Muslim patients receive care that aligns with their spiritual beliefs and values.

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### Challenges in Providing Spiritual Care to Muslim Patients

The thesis identifies several barriers to effective spiritual care for Muslim patients, including language barriers, lack of cultural understanding among healthcare staff, and a shortage of trained Muslim chaplains. Additionally, many Muslim patients fear discrimination, especially in the post-9/11 and post-Israel-Palestine conflict climate, which can deter them from seeking care. Non-Muslim chaplains may also lack the cultural competence to address the specific needs of Muslim patients, leading to discomfort and mistrust. The author suggests that increasing the number of trained Muslim chaplains and providing cultural competency training for healthcare staff are essential steps toward addressing these challenges.

### Psychological and Spiritual Benefits of Spiritual Care

The thesis highlights the psychological and spiritual benefits of integrating spiritual care into healthcare. Research shows that spiritual support can reduce depression, improve coping mechanisms, and enhance overall well-being. For Muslim patients, spiritual care can provide comfort during illness, help them navigate feelings of guilt or despair, and offer a sense of meaning and purpose. The author shares a personal anecdote from her clinical practicum, where she helped a patient struggling with guilt after childbirth, emphasizing the transformative power of compassionate listening and spiritual guidance.

### The Need for Inclusive Chaplaincy Models

The author calls for the development of inclusive chaplaincy models that respect and integrate the diverse spiritual needs of patients. This includes training chaplains in the specific rituals and practices of different faiths, particularly Islam, and fostering interfaith dialogue within healthcare settings. The thesis also emphasizes the importance of active listening, pastoral training, and cultural sensitivity in providing effective spiritual care. By creating a more inclusive and respectful healthcare environment, hospitals can better serve the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslim patients and other minority groups.

The thesis concludes that integrating Islamic spiritual and cultural care into Western healthcare systems is not only a matter of religious accommodation but also a crucial step toward achieving holistic and patient-centered care. By addressing the unique needs of Muslim patients, healthcare providers can improve patient satisfaction, enhance clinical outcomes, and foster a more inclusive and compassionate healthcare environment. The author emphasizes the urgent need for increased cultural competency training, the recruitment of more Muslim chaplains, and further research to ensure equitable access to spiritual care for all patients. Ultimately, this integration reflects a forward-thinking approach to healthcare that respects and celebrates the diversity of patient populations.

# A Tribute to Imam Sohaib Sultan: A Life of Grace, Joy, and Service

Omer Bajwa*

Imam Sohaib Sultan was a man whose life exemplified the Prophetic virtues of humility, joy, and service to others. Born into a family deeply committed to community building, Sohaib grew up surrounded by the ethos of service and devotion. His father, Dr. Talat Sultan, was an early leader and founder of several key Muslim organizations in North America, including MSA, ISNA, and ICNA. From an early age, Sohaib understood the critical role of local and national Muslim organizations in fostering community cohesion and spiritual growth.

Sohaib's childhood was marked by frequent moves due to his father's educational and professional commitments, providing him with a rich tapestry of experiences that shaped his understanding of people and places. He pursued undergraduate studies in journalism and political science at Indiana University Bloomington, a foundation that sharpened his intellect and deepened his curiosity about the world. He went on to earn a graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary, where he also studied Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations.

## A Pioneer in Islamic Chaplaincy

Imam Sohaib Sultan was among the pioneers of Islamic chaplaincy in higher education in the United States. He became one of the first full-time Muslim chaplains at a college or university, serving at Princeton University for 13 years. During his tenure, he and his beloved wife Arshe Ahmed established a vibrant and inclusive Muslim Life Program at Princeton, transforming it into a model of what a "community of joy" could look like. This concept of a joyful, engaged, and inclusive community became one of their enduring legacies.

In addition to his chaplaincy work, Sohaib was well known as the author of *The Koran For Dummies* (For Dummies, 2004) and *The Qur'an and Sayings of Prophet Muhammad: Selections Annotated & Explained* (SkyLight Paths, 2007). He also published a collection of essays entitled "Searching for Wisdom: Ruminations on Islam Today," and wrote a series of Ramadan reflections for Time.com. His MA thesis was published posthumously by Dr. Martin Nguyen as *An American Muslim Guide to the Art and Life of Preaching* (Fortress Press, 2023).

## Reflections on His Writing

Sohaib's writings were a testament to his ability to bridge the intellectual and the spiritual. He had a rare gift for conveying complex Islamic concepts in a way that was both accessible

* Chaplain Omer Bajwa is the Director of Muslim Life in the Chaplain's Office at Yale University.

and profound, making his works a source of guidance for readers from diverse backgrounds. His books and essays not only educated but also inspired, often encouraging self-reflection and a deeper connection with one's faith. Through his "30 Days of Ramadan" series, he brought a sense of spiritual intimacy to a global audience, showing how the sacred rhythms of the holy month could transform daily life. His writing continues to resonate as a lasting part of his legacy, offering wisdom and insight for generations to come.

### *The Art of Living and Dying with Grace*

In April 2020, Imam Sohaib Sultan was diagnosed with stage-four cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer). This profound challenge became a platform for him to teach one of the most enduring lessons of his life: how to live—and die—with grace. His reflections during this time revealed his unwavering faith and deep sense of gratitude.

In his own words, he viewed his illness not as a battle, but as a struggle with and acceptance of a divine decree: "Cancer too is a creation of God's and He has so wisely decreed to place it in my body. I am not battling cancer. I am struggling with cancer and accepting that it has much to teach me in life's journey... Cancer has cured me of certain outer ethical and inner spiritual ailments that I've carried with me for too long."
He drew strength and solace from the Qurʾān, often reciting verses that resonated with his journey. Among his favorites were:

> "*My Lord, make my entrance a truthful one and my exit a truthful one, and grant me supporting authority from Yourself.*" (17:80)

and

> *[Allah will say to the righteous]* "*O tranquil soul! Return to your Lord, well pleased [with Him] and well pleasing [to Him]. So join My [righteous] servants, and enter My Paradise.*" (89:27–30)

These verses encapsulated his approach to life and death, reflecting his aspiration to live with honor, faith, and a sense of divine purpose.

### *A Legacy of Reflection and Introspection*

One of the central themes of Imam Sohaib's teachings was *muḥāsaba*—self-reckoning and introspection. He encouraged everyone to take a deep and honest look at their spiritual and ethical lives, asking, "What blemishes are there, and how can I remove them?" At the same time, he encouraged everyone to celebrate their blessings, their positive attributes, and to be grateful to Allah. These practices, he taught, were essential for personal growth and for drawing closer to the Creator.

He once reflected: "Take a look in the spiritual mirror and ask yourself: what can I improve upon? How can I become more loving in the eyes of God?" These lessons became even more poignant as he confronted his own mortality, showing how *muḥāsaba* could lead to profound transformation.

### *The Final Sermon*

Imam Sohaib Sultan's final public sermon, delivered online on January 15, 2021, was later published as a chapter, titled "What I Learn from the Prophet ﷺ About Death and Dying" in the book *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (Templeton Press, 2022). In it, he poignantly reflected on the meaning of life and death, reminding us that it is the inevitability of death that gives life its urgency and meaning.

He taught that life's challenges, including terminal illness, are opportunities to cultivate patience, gratitude, and reliance on Allah. His example continues to inspire those grappling with their own trials, reminding us of the beauty that can emerge from struggle.

### *A Community of Joy and Love*

Imam Sohaib Sultan was not only a scholar and a leader but also a source of immense joy for those who knew him. He laughed and loved with unbridled enthusiasm, drawing others into his orbit of warmth and light. He had an extraordinary gift for turning pain into beauty, anger into understanding, and sadness into purpose.

As we remember Imam Sohaib Sultan, we honor a man who lived and died with unparalleled grace. His legacy will continue to guide and inspire us to build communities of joy, to practice *muḥāsaba*, and to approach life's challenges with faith and patience. May Allah grant him an honorable entrance into Paradise, as he so often prayed, and may we strive to embody the lessons he so lovingly taught.

*Innā lillāh wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn*.

*A National Standard-Bearer for Islamic Chaplaincy*

# Key Issues for Chaplaincy Endorsement: Imam Zaid Shakir's Responses to Critical Questions

Muslim Endorsement Council

To ensure fairness in evaluating candidates for chaplaincy endorsement, the board of the Muslim Endorsement Council, Inc. (MEC) asked renowned and respected scholar Imam Zaid Shakir about some contemporary issues confronting the American Muslim community. These issues are critical for MEC's work in assessing chaplains for endorsement and supporting them in their approach when they encounter these issues, regardless of their work settings, in a consistent manner backed by Islamic scholarly consensus. Imam Zaid graciously shared his insights and provided thoughtful responses. It is our honor to present a summary of his responses on key questions related to identity, *ʿaqīda* (creed), and LGBT+ below.

The first question posed was about the scholarly definition of a Muslim. Imam Zaid replied that a Muslim is someone who willingly accepts and follows everything of theological, legal, and ethical import made known to humanity by Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him). This definition emphasizes the breadth of Islam as a way of life that encompasses all aspects of a person's life and guides his/her spiritual and worldly endeavors. One might ask a follow-up question: *Who* determines what the Prophet taught us to be of import? This leads us to the second question posed to Imam Zaid.

To this second question—what constitutes an acceptable school of thought when it comes to the diverse interpretations of Qurʾān and Sunna within Islam—he underscored the centrality of both as the primary sources of theology, law, and ethics for Muslims. He emphasized the fundamental theological beliefs of Islam, including Allah's Oneness and incomparability, the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, and the realities of the hereafter. Additionally, he outlined the significant legal injunctions and ethical teachings that constitute the basis of the Islamic faith and practice.

When asked who constituted the American Muslim community, Imam Zaid provided a nuanced understanding that acknowledges its geographical reality; however, in theological terms, there is only the global *umma*. He described the latter as a rich tapestry of beliefs and practices unified by a common overarching faith—the basics of

this common faith are as specified in his answer to the previous question. He added that it is comprised of Sunni, Shi'i, Ibadi, and other legal and theological schools of thought.

As for the general framework for assessing *ʿaqīda*, Imam Zaid outlined a comprehensive approach to understanding and evaluating the Muslim's theological beliefs via the Ahl al-Hadith, Ash'aris, Maturidis, and other theological schools. He adds that due to the Qurʾān and ḥadīth's primacy and evidentiary nature vis-à-vis the *ʿaqīda*, rejecting either one or both of them means rejecting Islam altogether.

Lastly, Imam Zaid was asked about the scholarly stance on homosexual and transsexual Muslims. While acknowledging the reality of same-sex attractions, that Muslims may suffer from gender dysphoria, or be challenged in other ways in terms of gender identity, he stated that these feelings are very real tests from Allah and, as such, do not constitute sins in and of themselves. However, engaging in forbidden acts or declaring these forbidden acts to be lawful is sinful, and those who do so or advocate for them are considered to have left Islam. The acts which are considered forbidden, as it relates to gender identity and sexual orientation, have been outlined by a plurality of Islamic scholars.[1]

Imam Zaid highlights the importance of providing compassionate pastoral care for individuals struggling with their gender identity and/or same-sex attractions, one that complements traditional Islamic methods of treatment.

His responses provide invaluable guidance to MEC, and his insights provide a deep and broader understanding of Islamic principles and practices that will help us navigate the complexities we face when assessing chaplaincy candidates and supporting endorsed chaplains who mirror our diverse Muslim community. We and our chaplains must uphold these basic Islamic teachings and ensure that our chaplains embody its values and ethics.

We are grateful to Imam Zaid Shakir for sharing his wisdom. We thank him for his dedication to the American Muslim community and to MEC. His contributions enrich our understanding and strengthen our commitment to fostering a fair approach to Islamic chaplaincy endorsement.

[1] See for example two articles by Mobeen Vaid for an exploration of how Sunni Islamic scholarship has treated the topics of homosexuality and gender non-conformity: Mobeen Vaid, "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts? Quranic Revisionism and the Case of Scott Kugle," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 34, no. 3 (July): 45–97, https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v34i3.352; and Mobeen Vaid, "And the Male Is Not like the Female: Sunni Islam and Gender Nonconformity," *MuslimMatters*, July 24, 2017, https://muslimmatters.org/2017/07/24/and-the-male-is-not-like-the-female-sunni-islam-and-gender-nonconformity/.

*A National Standard-Bearer for Islamic Chaplaincy*

# From Feedback to Framework: The Development of MEC's Chaplaincy Endorsement Rubric

Muslim Endorsement Council

## Introduction

The Muslim Endorsement Council, Inc. (MEC) is committed to ensuring that Muslim chaplains are both religiously and professionally qualified to serve in different settings as representatives of the diverse American Musim community. As lay-leader[1] representatives of the faith, chaplains must be both well-versed in Islamic teachings and equipped with the necessary pastoral skills to function in various private and public institutional and community settings. Our endorsement process evaluates candidates across five core competency standards. This introduction provides an overview of the rubric that MEC developed to evaluate candidates for endorsement across the standards, its utilization in the endorsement process, and a summary of each section within the spreadsheet that encapsulates this rubric.

## Background

During the painstaking consultative process with Muslim academics, national Muslim organizations, and some non-Muslim entities that led to MEC's formation in 2010, competency standards were established to ascertain each chaplaincy candidate's proficiency in five key areas:

1. Qur'ānic Literacy: Knowledge and understanding of the Qur'ān.
2. Prophetic Theory and Praxis: Familiarity with the Prophet's (peace be upon him) life and teachings.
3. Cross-Cultural Capability: Ability to work with diverse cultural and religious groups.

[1] "Lay-leader" here is used in the generic meaning of the word, not as a faith group-specific religious Non-Chaplain Lay Leader (NCLL) or Designated Religious Group Leaders (DRGL), as used by the Department of Defense.

4. Facilitation Skills: Competence in counseling and connecting with people in a respectful and sensitive manner.
5. Professional Theory and Practice: Integration of chaplaincy as a professional discipline within their institution.

This rubric for evaluating Muslim chaplains for endorsement was developed based on feedback from participants at the "Islamic Leadership Conference: Building Core Competencies for Imams, Chaplains, and Lay Leaders," held on March 4, 2023. Convened by MEC at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, it sought to define and set standards. MEC presented its competency standards for critique and feedback, with the goal of establishing core competencies acceptable to the American Muslim community and creating a fair and relevant evaluation process.

## The Need

The need for a rubric emerged from the ensuing critique and feedback at the above-mentioned conference. A consensus was reached on the threshold of religious knowledge required to ensure that Islam remains at the center of how chaplains serve. All candidates are assessed against the same criteria to promote fairness, consistency, and transparency. By defining specific indicators for each competency, this rubric objectively measures a chaplain's skills and knowledge, thereby reducing the potential for bias and subjectivity. A rubric also provides detailed feedback beyond a simple pass/fail score, recognizing that competence exists along a spectrum.

Further, a well-structured rubric also establishes a basis for developing educational curricula, provides a framework for training, and serves as a tool for self- and job-assessment—in short, a roadmap for chaplains' professional growth. A rubric highlights areas of strength and identifies opportunities for further development to encourage continuous improvement.

In her keynote address, Dr. Ingrid Mattson emphasized that such an approach holds chaplains accountable to the highest standards, guaranteeing that they are well-prepared to meet their institutions' or communities' spiritual and pastoral needs.[2] A rigorous assessment process also enhances the credibility of MEC's endorsement, assuring the community and other stakeholders that the endorsed chaplains are able to provide effective spiritual care.

## Overview of the Rubric

The rubric, a comprehensive tool that evaluates candidates through the criteria associated

[2] Dr. Ingrid Mattson (PhD, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, the University of Chicago, 1999) served as a professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary from 1998 to 2012. There, she developed and directed North America's first accredited graduate program for Muslim chaplains and led the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Since 2012, she has held the London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies at Huron University College in Canada. Mattson's work focuses on Qurʾānic interpretation, Islamic theological ethics, and interfaith relations. She is currently involved in the Hurma Project.

with each competency standard, was developed by the MEC board in collaboration with Professor Bonita McGee[3] of The Islamic Seminary of America, assisted by Chaplain Shazeeda Khan (president, MEC) and Chaplain AbdulMalik Negedu (advisory board member, MEC). The Board of MEC, the Roundtable of Seminaries (comprising Muslim academics and leaders from various institutions), and various professional Muslim chaplains reviewed the draft document.[4]

The multi-stage assessment process includes self-reflection, practical demonstrations, and providing professional and character references to ensure a thorough evaluation of each candidate's capabilities. The spreadsheet consists of several sections, each one dedicated to a specific aspect. Below is a summary of each section's content and purpose:

### *The Cover Sheet*

The Cover Sheet overviews the rubric, including instructions for its use and a summary of the five competency standards. It serves as the entry point for evaluators, guiding them through the subsequent sections and the assessment process.

### *Autobiographical Statement*

The Autobiographical Statement allows candidates to present their personal and professional journeys. This section is crucial, as it provides insight into their backgrounds, motivations, and commitment. Candidates are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and aspirations to provide a holistic view of their qualifications.

Evaluators review this statement to gain insight into their qualifications by examining candidates' family and religious lives, significant events that shaped their interest in service, and their experiences in religious leadership and community involvement. This includes an assessment of a candidate's personal code of ethics, how he/she applies Islamic principles in daily life, and the life experiences that have prepared him/her for chaplaincy.

This holistic view helps determine a candidate's readiness and suitability for lay religious leadership and the public representation of Islam.

### *Qurʾānic Literacy*

The Qurʾānic Literacy section assesses candidates' proficiency in Qurʾānic recitation and understanding. It includes accurate pronunciation (*tajwīd*), memorization, familiarity with

[3] Prof. Bonita McGee is a seasoned consultant, trainer, facilitator, and instructor with over twenty years of experience in community capacity building and advocacy for domestic violence and sexual assault awareness. Her extensive background includes thirteen years in public health policy, focusing on cancer and chronic disease prevention through policy, systems, and environmental changes. McGee collaborates with educational institutions, government agencies, and non-profit organizations, providing expertise in strategic planning, program development, and leadership training. She holds an MA in Islamic studies (the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences), a BA in business administration (Ohio State University), and is also a founding member of The Islamic Seminary of America, Inc. (formerly the Islamic Seminary Foundation).

[4] See the Appendix for a full list of reviewers.

scholarly interpretations of the Qurʾān, and the ability to apply its teachings in practical contexts.

### *Prophetic Theory and Praxis*

The Prophetic Theory and Praxis section assesses knowledge of and ability to apply *fiqh* within an institutional or community setting. A solid understanding of the basic *fiqh* of Islamic worship, practices, and rituals is essential for all Muslims and critical for lay religious leaders. It also evaluates candidates' understanding of major events in the Prophet's life as well as ḥadīth (prophetic traditions) and their ability to incorporate these into their chaplaincy work. This section ensures that each applicant possesses both the theoretical knowledge and the practical skills that enable him/her to embody the Prophetic model in his/her interactions and pastoral guidance.

### *Cross-Cultural Capability*

This section focuses on the candidate's ability to navigate and respect diverse cultural contexts, and whether they demonstrate the understanding and sensitivity which can significantly impact the effectiveness of pastoral care.

Muslim chaplains must exhibit strong interpersonal skills for working effectively with Muslims and non-Muslims from diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as with both men and women. This competency is demonstrated through self-awareness and insight into one's own biases, a basic understanding of the major cultural groups likely to be encountered, and effective conflict resolution skills.

### *Facilitation Skills*

The Facilitation Skills section assesses candidates' proficiency in leading and facilitating group activities, discussions, and counseling sessions. This section evaluates their ability to engage with individuals and groups, thereby fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

Candidates must possess the ability to counsel and connect with people in a sensitive, open, and respectful manner—providing support that enhances the patient's well-being; offering support and referrals to individuals experiencing loss and grief; and developing, coordinating, and facilitating public worship or spiritual practices, as appropriate.

### *Professional Theory and Practice*

The Professional Theory and Practice section examines a candidate's understanding of professional ethics, standards, and practices in chaplaincy. This includes criteria related to professional conduct, confidentiality, and ongoing professional development to ensure adherence to the highest standards of professional behavior.

In addition, these individuals should be able to promote and integrate chaplaincy as a professional discipline within their institutions. This competency includes establishing and maintaining professional and interdisciplinary relationships inside and outside the institution, articulating a clear understanding of institutional culture and systems

(particularly in ethical decision-making), and demonstrating the ability to document interactions within the institution.

### *The Glossary*

The Glossary defines and explains key terms used to ensure clarity and consistency in the assessment process, thereby offering a valuable reference for both candidates and evaluators.

## Using the Rubric

The interview process begins with an initial review, during which the MEC administration ensures that all of the required documents have been submitted. A three-member panel, including one individual who must be knowledgeable and experienced in the candidate's field, is then constituted. Other criteria for panelist selection include expertise in the Qurʾān and Sunna, as well as professional knowledge and experience. Qualified candidates are subsequently invited for an interview that focuses on assessing the candidate's qualifications, with particular attention to his/her experience, knowledge, and ability to meet competency standards using the rubric.

Candidates are scored from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "does not demonstrate competency" and 5 indicating "exceeds competency." Each interview panel member provides a score based on his/her specific interview focus area to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the candidate's qualifications.

Panel members then confer and debrief, sharing their observations and insights. Each one submits his/her rubric report to the MEC administration, which prepares a consolidated rubric report. This collaborative approach helps ensure a balanced and fair evaluation process. The tabulated final scores provide a quantitative measure of the candidate's performance.

This consolidated report and the raw scores are presented to the MEC board. Notably, this body has intentionally chosen *not* to establish a fixed scoring threshold. This is so that its members can consider each potential chaplain's unique context, including the nuance of each setting, thus guaranteeing that the endorsement process remains flexible and adaptable. By considering the individual circumstances, area of chaplaincy, and strengths of each candidate, the board can make more informed, equitable, and tailored decisions.

Successful applicants will be granted full or provisional endorsements. Applicants may have their endorsement deferred, which means more information is needed. Unsuccessful applicants will be denied endorsement.

This structured approach produces a thorough and objective evaluation. The MEC board assesses each candidate's overall suitability for endorsement based on his/her interview performance and submitted materials, and then makes its decision. Candidates have the right to appeal against the initial decision. This comprehensive process, guided by the rubric, ensures fairness, transparency, and accountability.

## Conclusion

Developing and implementing MEC's Chaplaincy Endorsement Rubric marks a significant advancement in standardizing and professionalizing Islamic chaplaincy. By establishing clear competency standards and a rigorous, structured evaluation process, the rubric ensures that candidates are assessed fairly and comprehensively across critical areas of knowledge, skills, and ethical practice. This tool's feedback-driven creation reflects MEC's commitment to upholding the highest standards in chaplaincy, ensuring that endorsed chaplains are well-equipped to meet their communities' diverse spiritual and pastoral needs. This approach not only strengthens the credibility of the endorsement process, but also supports the chaplain's ongoing professional growth and fosters excellence in service and leadership.

## Appendix

The list of individuals who reviewed MEC's Chaplaincy Endorsement Rubric in order to provide feedback on it include:

### *Board of MEC at the time of the review*

Chaplain Shazeeda Khan (President)
Imam Dr. Salahuddin Muhammad (Vice President/Liaison and Representative of the Association of Muslim Chaplains)
Aqil Hashim, LCSW (Secretary)
Chaplain Rafael D. Lantigua Jr. (Treasurer)
Imam Kashif Abdul Karim (Member)
Chaplain Patricia Anton (Member)

### *Roundtable of Seminaries*

American Islamic College (represented by Dr. Feryal Salem)
Boston Islamic Seminary (represented by Dr. Suheil Laher)
Bayan Islamic Graduate School (represented by Vice President Munir Shaikh)
Hartford International University (represented by Dr. Bilal Ansari)
The Islamic Seminary of America (represented by Executive Vice President Dr. James Jones)

### *Muslim Academics, Leaders, and Professional Muslim Chaplains*

Chaplain Ibrahim Long
Chaplain Mustafa Boz
Dr. Ingrid Mattson

# Muslim Endorsement Council, Inc.
## Endorsement Rubric Cover Sheet

**Assessment Application Number** _____
Use Naming Convention

**Name of Applicant** _____ **Assessor name:** _____
(First name, Last Name) (First name, Last Name)

**Field of Chaplaincy** _____ **Review Date:** _____
(Please provide date review initiated)

**MEC Board Determination**
**Endorsement Status***
**(This should be the final step)**

| Section/Competency | Scores |
|---|---|
| Qur'anic Literacy | 0 |
| Prophetic Theory & Praxis | 0 |
| Cross Cultural Capability | 0 |
| Facilitation Skills | 0 |
| Professional Theory & Practice | 0 |

**Application Requirements Checklist**

The section below will be completed by the MEC admin to ensure application completeness and to provide any necessary comments on the application package being reviewed.

| Criteria | Not Responsive | Minimally Responsive | Responsive | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Information Not Provided or Does Not Meet Stated Criteria* | *Lacks major sufficient information* | *Information Provided Meets Stated Criteria* | |
| **Current professional résumé** | | | | |
| **Autobiography** | | | | |
| **Five competency statements: *Qur'anic Literacy, Prophetic Theory & Praxis, Cross Cultural Capability, Facilitation Skills, Professional Theory & Practice*** | | | | |
| **Proof of graduation from an institution of higher education in the areas of Islamic Studies, Islamic Chaplaincy, and/or a related field.** | | | | |
| **Proof of at least one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education training** | | | | |
| **Statement of any voluntary chaplaincy work experience (if applicable)** | | | | |
| **Notarized letter of accountability for ethical conduct. Mail the original to the P.O. Box** | | | | |
| **Background Check Authorization/Release of Liability form** | | | | |
| **Two References:** *a) Religious* *b) Professional* | | | | |
| **Copy of birth records, proof of citizenship, permanent residency, or work authorization forms.** | | | | |
| **Non-refundable application and processing fee of $150** | | | | |

The components for this applicant are sufficient and the application shall be forwarded to the panel for review.

**To be completed by MEC Admin**

Reviewed and Certified by: _____ Date: _____

**To be completed by Assessor**

I attest that I, as assesor, have done my due diligence in the review and assessment of the application based on the MEC guidance and stated criteria. I have no conflict of interest involving the assessment of the applicant.

Assessor Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions **Please use the following form to assess the quality and responsiveness of the applicant to the stated criteria.**
**All scores require a written justification.**
**Assessors may provide additional recommendations and resources that may be used in the final determination letter to the applicant.**

| Qur'anic Literacy | Does not demonstrate competency<br>1 | Needs clarification<br>2 | Competent with areas of improvement<br>3 | Demonstrates competency<br>4 | Exceeds competency<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Reading / Reciting the Qur'an in Arabic with Tajweed** | Does not demonstrate the ability to read Arabic or with extreme difficulty. | Demonstrates the ability to read Qur'an but with difficulty and is error prone. Recitation is without tajweed. Al Fatiha is adequate. | Demonstrates ability to read Qur'an adequately and with no major errors. Recites with some tajweed. Al Fatiha is completed with proper tajweed and no mistakes. | Demonstrates the ability to read Qur'an is good and with no errors. Ability to recite several surahs with tajweed. Al Fatiha is completed with proper tajweed and no mistakes. | Demonstrates the ability to recite one juz with tajweed and with no mistakes. |
| **Memorization** | Does not demonstrate the ability of memorization or recall of Qur'anic verses aside from Al Fatiha. | Demonstrates the ability to recall and recite with memorization Al Fatiha and at least 2 short surahs or equivalent verses. | Demonstrates the ability to recall and recite with memorization of several short surahs with some minor mistakes. | Demonstrates the ability to recall and recite with memorization up to half a juz or equivalent with few minor mistakes. | Demonstrates the ability to recall and recite with memorization at least one juz or equivalent with no mistakes. |
| **Familiarity with Scholarly Interpretations of Qur'an** | Does not demonstrate the familiarity with any scholarly interpretations of Qur'an. | Demonstrates familiarity with scholarly interpretations, conveys basic knowledge and awareness of scholarly interpretations but with a lack of in-depth discussion. | Demonstrates familiarity with scholarly interpretations is adequate with some gaps in knowledge. | Demonstrates familiarity by identifying, referencing, and articulating nuance of at least one scholarly interpretation and adequate knowledge of other scholarly interpretations. | Demonstrates familiarity by identifying, referencing, and articulating differences and nuance with more than two scholarly interpretations of the Qur'an. |
| **Ability to Apply the Qur'an to Everyday Situations in the US and in the Context of Chaplaincy Engagement** | Does not demonstrate the ability to connect and apply the Qur'an to everyday situations in general or personally. | Professional and personal examples provided lack substantive understanding or application. | Professional and everyday examples demonstrate an ability to apply the Qur'an but with little confidence. | Professional and everyday examples demonstrated convey a knowledge and awareness of the situation and in the application of Qur'an with confidence. | Demonstrates ability to apply Qur'an by providing at least two concrete examples where the applicant has applied Qur'an (teachings) in an everyday situation.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to apply Qur'an by providing at least two concrete examples where applicant has applied Qur'an (teachings) in the context chaplaincy engagement.<br><br>Examples convey a confidence in knowledge and understanding of Qur'an and the situation with humility and situational awareness. |

| Prophetic Theory and Praxis | Does not demonstrate competency<br>1 | Needs clarification<br>2 | Competent with areas of improvement<br>3 | Demonstrates competency<br>4 | Exceeds competency<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ability to Recall and Discuss Major Events in the Life of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him)** | Does not demonstrate the ability to recall and discuss major events beyond naming of events. | Ability to recall major events is limited with sparse details.<br><br>Has a broad understanding of the general context of the event but is unable to go into further detail or with some mistakes. | Demonstrates the ability to recall some major events with adequate detail.<br><br>Discussion conveys core aspects of the event.<br><br>Applicant demonstrates some difficulty in recall and accuracy. | Demonstrates the ability to recall some major events in detail with assurance and accuracy.<br><br>Discussion conveys core aspects of the event and its impact.<br><br>Ability to highlight and connect major events of thematic relevance and complexity is sufficient. | Demonstrates the ability to recall multiple major events in detail.<br><br>Discussion conveys depth and detail, the context and results of major events.<br><br>Highlight and connect major events of thematic relevance and complexity. |
| **Basic Knowledge of Hadith and Their Impact on the Muslim Practice of Islam** | Does not demonstrate the knowledge of hadith sciences and methodology.<br><br>Does not demonstrate the ability to recall or reference hadith or their impact on the Muslim practice of Islam. | Demonstrates limited knowledge of hadith sciences, including basic methodology is limited, with partial accuracy or misunderstanding.<br><br>Demonstrates limited ability to recall or reference hadith from any collection or is inaccurate.<br><br>Discussion of the implications of hadith knowledge and understanding by Muslims in their religious practice is limited and shallow in their analysis. | Demonstrates some knowledge of hadith science fundamentals.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to recall or reference frequently used hadith e.g. hadith qudsi<br><br>Discussion regarding hadith and their impact on the Muslim practice is adequate. | Demonstrates knowledge of hadith sciences, including basic methodology, isnad, and criticism is sufficient and conveyed with competence.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to recall or reference hadith from at least one collection is accurate and sufficient.<br><br>Discussion of the implications of hadith knowledge and understanding by Muslims in their religious practice with at least one examples is sufficient. | Demonstrates knowledge of hadith sciences, including basic methodology, isnad, and criticism.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to recall or reference hadith from at least two collections.<br><br>Discuss the implications of hadith knowledge and understanding by Muslims in their religious practice with at least two examples, including the impact of weak or fabricated hadith. |
| **Ability to Apply the Prophetic Example to Current Everyday Situations in the United States** | Does not demonstrate the ability to recall or apply Prophetic example to current everyday situation. | Demonstrates a limited ability to recall and discuss application of the Prophetic example to current everyday situations in the US; it is sparse in detail or depth.<br><br>Examples provided are limited in range and do not relate to the applicant's field of chaplaincy.<br><br>Examples that demonstrate situational awareness and application of Prophetic model are limited.<br><br>Lacks familiarity of prophetic duas. Struggles to appropriately compose dua for non-Muslims. | Demonstrates ability to recall and discuss an example of their application of the Prophetic example to current everyday situations in the US is broad, lacking detail but adequate overall.<br><br>Examples provided should relate to the chaplain's field as well as a diverse range of situations.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to offer dua for Muslims (in Arabic and in English) and non-Muslims with some references. | Demonstrates ability to recall and discuss with sufficient depth at least one concrete example of their application of the Prophetic example to current everyday situations in the US.<br><br>Examples provided relate to the applicant's field of chaplaincy. Overall range of situations is sufficient.<br><br>Examples demonstrate sufficient situational awareness and application of Prophetic model.<br><br>Demonstrates the ability to offer dua for both Muslims (in Arabic and English) and non-Muslims is sufficient. | Demonstrates ability to recall and discuss with depth at least two concrete examples of their application of the Prophetic example to current everyday situations in the US.<br><br>Examples provided relate to the chaplain's field as well as a diverse range of situations.<br><br>Examples should demonstrate situational awareness and application of Prophetic model.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to offer appropriate dua for both Muslims (in Arabic and English) and non-Muslims with beauty. |

| **Prophetic Theory and Praxis** (Continued) | **Does not demonstrate competency 1** | **Needs clarification 2** | **Competent with areas of improvement 3** | **Demonstrates competency 4** | **Exceeds competency 5** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sound Knowledge of the Basic Fiqh of Islamic Worship (Islamic pillars, practice and ritual)** | Does not demonstrate the knowledge of basic Fiqh of Islamic worship outside of the five pillars. | Demonstrates ability to recall and discuss the 5 pillars of Islam is adequate, with the core beliefs discussion is limited.<br><br>Ability to identify and discuss basic differences in fiqh interpretation e.g. prayer, fasting, and schools of thought is limited or with gaps in knowledge.<br><br>Knowledge pertaining to the fiqh of rituals in their specific chaplaincy area is limited. | Demonstrates knowledge of basic fiqh covering the 5 pillars and core beliefs.<br><br>Knowledge of other aspects of Islamic practice and fiqh of rituals pertaining to their specific chaplaincy area is adequate or may require refreshing. | Demonstrates ability to recall and discuss the 5 pillars of Islam, and core beliefs are sufficient and conveyed with general confidence and accuracy.<br><br>Knowledge of the core elements of core life cycle events and fiqh of rituals pertaining to their specific chaplaincy area is overall sufficient with some need to reference reliable sources.<br><br>Ability to identify and discuss basic differences in fiqh interpretation e.g. prayer, fasting, and schools of thought is sufficient. | Demonstrates the ability to recall and discuss the 5 pillars of Islam, core beliefs, and the core elements of life cycle events, holidays, and communal observances with excellence.<br><br>Demonstrates ability to discuss with excellence and clarity the fiqh of rituals pertaining to their specific chaplaincy area and the basic differences in fiqh interpretation e.g. prayer, fasting, and schools of thought. |

| Cross Cultural Capability | Does not demonstrate competency<br>1 | Needs clarification<br>2 | Competent with areas of improvement<br>3 | Demonstrates competency<br>4 | Exceeds competency<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Self-awareness and Insight When Dealing with One's Own Biases** | Does not demonstrate the ability to discuss basic concepts of bias, prejudice, equality or equity.<br><br>Does not provide lessons learned from personal experience or its impact on the applicant's chaplaincy and continued self-awareness.<br><br>No ability to discuss the concept of cultural humility. | Demonstrates limited ability to discuss implicit bias, prejudice, racism, equity, and equality concepts. May demonstrate knowledge and awareness of one of the concepts sufficiently.<br><br>Discussion should include personal engagement with facing the above concepts as a recipient and, if applicable, the opposite. Discussion demonstrates gaps or blind spots in applicant's self-awareness and application of concepts. | Ability to discuss the concepts and differences of racism, equity, and equality is adequate with a display of strength in knowledge and awareness of some of the concepts.<br><br>Discussion should include personal engagement with facing the above concepts as a recipient and if applicable the opposite is adequate, indicates decent self-awareness. | Demonstrates the ability to discuss with depth the concepts and differences of racism, equity, and equality is sufficient. Discussion regarding implicit bias/prejudice may be limited.<br><br>Discussion should include personal engagement with facing the above concepts as a recipient and, if applicable, the opposite.<br><br>Discussion provides contextual factors, and lessons learned as it impacts applicant's chaplaincy and continued self-awareness. Discussion may include few gaps in self-awareness. | Demonstrates the ability to discuss with depth the concepts and differences of implicit bias, prejudice, racism, equity, and equality.<br><br>Discussion should include personal engagement with facing the above concepts as a recipient and, if applicable, the opposite.<br><br>Discussion provides contextual factors, describe incident(s), triggers, reflection, resolution, and lessons learned as it impacts applicant's chaplaincy and continued self-awareness.<br><br>Ability to discuss the concept of cultural humility. |
| **Basic Working Knowledge of the Major Cultural Groups That the Chaplain is Likely to Encounter in His or Her Chosen Field of Chaplaincy** | Does not demonstrate the working knowledge of the major cultural groups in their chosen field. Discussion is surface level. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss major cultural groups is limited with few details regarding demographics, needs, etc.<br><br>Discussion provides example of engagement with a major cultural group in their chosen field of chaplaincy limited. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss is adequate with some analysis regarding demographics, needs, etc.<br><br>May have more in-depth working knowledge of one group.<br><br>Discussion provides example of engagement with cultural groups but maybe limited in engagement with major cultural group in their chosen field of chaplaincy. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss with depth the primary and secondary major cultural groups they are likely to encounter in their chosen field is sufficient.<br><br>Discussion should include general descriptors, challenges faced, and general approach to engaging the population. May not have full comprehension of group dynamics.<br><br>Discussion provides at least one example of engagement with a major cultural group, citing lessons learned and impact on future strategies for engagement. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss with depth the several major cultural groups and sub-groups they are likely to encounter in their chosen field.<br><br>Discussion should include general descriptors, challenges faced, group dynamics, nuances, and general approach to engaging the population.<br><br>Discussion provides at least two examples of engagement with a major cultural group, citing lessons learned and impact on future strategies for engagement. |
| **Effective Conflict Resolution Skills** | Does not demonstrate the ability to identify and discuss conflict or communication style. Has limited to no knowledge of conflict resolution skills. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss is limited with some analysis regarding demographics, needs, etc.<br><br>Understanding of conflict resolution methods is lacking with little discussion regarding skills and tools.<br>Discussion regarding how the applicant has handled conflict situations lacks depth of analysis with no lessons learned for future application. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss their conflict and communication style.<br><br>Understanding of conflict resolution methods is adequate, with some gaps.<br><br>Discussion regarding how the applicant has handled conflict situations includes some analysis but may have gaps in self-awareness or skill application. | Demonstrates the ability to identify and discuss their conflict style with commentary on how that impacts their effectiveness in their respective field of chaplaincy. Discussion regarding their communication style may be limited.<br><br>Understanding of conflict resolution methods, theories, and skills is sufficient, with minor gaps. Discussion regarding how the applicant has handled conflict situations with lessons learned and implications to chaplaincy practice is sufficient. | Demonstrates ability to identify and discuss applicant's conflict and communication style with commentary on how that impacts their effectiveness in their respective field of chaplaincy.<br><br>Understanding of conflict resolution methods, theories, and skills is comprehensive. Describe strategies in navigating conflict situations for mutually acceptable outcomes. Discuss how the applicant has handled conflict situations as a participant and facilitator with lessons learned and implications to chaplaincy practice. |

| Facilitation Skills | Does not demonstrate competency<br>1 | Needs clarification<br>2 | Competent with areas of improvement<br>3 | Demonstrates competency<br>4 | Exceeds competency<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Providing Effective Support That Contributes to the Well-being of Persons Who Request Their Help** | Does not demonstrate the understanding of basic skills of help-seeking, with limited to no discussion regarding ethics or boundaries.<br><br>Does not demonstrate the ability to assess a person's well-being.<br><br>Examples are vague and insufficiently demonstrates competency. | Understanding of theories and skills related to help-seeking and helping is limited, with some minimal discussion regarding boundaries.<br><br>Demonstrates the ability to assess a person's well-being is limited with some noted gaps in knowledge, awareness, and practice.<br><br>Examples are vague with little to no rationale for chosen interventions. | Basic understanding of the theories and skills of help-seeking and helping, including ethics, explicit and implicit boundaries, and self-care is adequate with a few gaps.<br><br>Demonstrates the ability to assess the person's spiritual, emotional, and overall well-being may have limited experience but adequate.<br><br>Examples with a discussion regarding how the applicant has supported the well-being of a person who requested their help, is limited with some flags regarding limits of expertise and when to refer. A clear rationale for intervention is provided. | Basic understanding of the theories and skills (active listening, empathy, good questions, etc.) of help-seeking and helping, including ethics, explicit and implicit boundaries, and self-care are sufficient and with good indication of strengths in boundaries and ethics.<br><br>Demonstrates the ability to assess the person's spiritual, emotional, and overall well-being is strong. May demonstrate strengths in assessing one aspect over another but is generally well-rounded.<br><br>Provide at least one examples with a discussion regarding how the applicant has supported the well-being of a person who requested their help, including maintaining confidentiality, dignity, and understanding of the limits of the applicant's individual experience and making referrals. A clear rationale for intervention is provided. | Provide a clear understanding of the theories and skills (active listening, empathy, good questions, etc.) of help-seeking and helping, including ethics, explicit and implicit boundaries, and self-care.<br><br>Demonstrates the ability to assess the person's spiritual, emotional, and overall well-being.<br><br>Provide at least two examples with a discussion regarding how the applicant has supported the well-being of a person who requested their help, including maintaining confidentiality, dignity, and understanding of the limits of the applicant's individual experience and making referrals. A clear rationale for intervention is provided. |
| **Providing Support to and/or Referrals for Persons Experiencing Loss and Grief** | Does not demonstrate the knowledge and awareness of the dynamics of loss and grief, including spiritual care and knowledge of Islamic understandings associated with death, janazah, loss, and grief.<br><br>Very limited knowledge and awareness of resources specific to supporting those suffering from loss and grief, including religious and non-religious resources.<br><br>Examples provided are vague and demonstrate little to no application of spiritual care or Islamic understanding. | Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the dynamics of loss and grief, including spiritual care and knowledge of Islamic understandings associated with death, janazah, loss, and grief is limited. Islamic knowledge displays gaps in understanding or ability to appropriately apply the knowledge.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of resources specific to supporting those suffering from loss and grief, including religious and non-religious resources is adequate. No discussion on compensation for limited resources.<br><br>Examples with discussion regarding how the applicant has provided support that contributed to the well-being of a person who was experiencing loss and grief are limited and may indicate experiential limitation or discomfort providing they level of support. | Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the dynamics of loss and grief, including spiritual care and knowledge of Islamic understandings associated with death, janazah, loss, and grief is adequate with some gaps in knowledge.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of resources specific to supporting those suffering from loss and grief, including religious and non-religious resources.<br><br>Examples with discussion regarding how the applicant has provided support that contributed to the well-being of a person who was experiencing loss and grief is adequate and may demonstrate limited experience with loss and grief but indicates overall a solid countenance in engagement. | Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the dynamics of loss and grief, including spiritual care and knowledge of Islamic understandings associated with death, janazah, loss, and grief is sufficient and well rounded.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of resources specific to supporting those suffering from loss and grief, including religious and non-religious resources. Discussion includes the identification and cultivation of resources.<br><br>Examples with discussion regarding how the applicant has provided support that contributed to the well-being of a person who was experiencing loss and grief is sufficient in depth of experience and countenance. | Demonstrates knowledge, awareness, and practical experience of the dynamics of loss and grief, including spiritual care and knowledge of Islamic understandings associated with death, janazah, loss, and grief.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of resources that support those suffering from loss and grief, including religious and non-religious intervention and resources.<br><br>Provide at least two examples with a discussion regarding how the applicant has provided support that contributed to the well-being of a person experiencing loss and grief. Examples offer distinct experiences with different intervention approaches. |

| **Facilitation Skills** (Continued) | **Does not demonstrate competency** **1** | **Needs clarification** **2** | **Competent with areas of improvement** **3** | **Demonstrates competency** **4** | **Exceeds competency** **5** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Developing, Coordinating and Facilitating Public Worship/Spiritual Practices as Appropriate** | Does not demonstrate the knowledge and understanding of public worship/spiritual practice such as jummah prayer, Eid, janazah, vigil, etc. with discussion on requirements where appropriate. Displays significant gaps in knowledge.<br><br>Knowledge and awareness of the strategies to identify and cultivate resources specific to supporting public worship/spiritual practice is minimal with vague examples regarding the development, coordination, and facilitation of public worship/spiritual practice. May not have led in any coordination of public worship/spiritual practice. | Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of public worship/spiritual practice such as jummah prayer, Eid, janazah, vigil, etc. with discussion on requirements, where appropriate, is limited with some gaps in knowledge.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the strategies to identify and cultivate resources specific to supporting public worship/spiritual practice. Example of cultivating or developing a resource that supports public worship/spiritual practice is regulated to a supporting role with weak experience in coordination or knowledge of variance in worship/spiritual practice. | Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of public worship/spiritual practice, such as jummah prayer, Eid, janazah, vigil, etc., with discussion of requirements where appropriate.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the strategies to identify and cultivate resources specific to supporting public worship/spiritual practice. At least on example of cultivating or developing a resource that supports public worship/spiritual practice.<br><br>Provides at least 3 distinct examples with discussion regarding the development, coordination, and facilitation of public worship/spiritual practice. | Demonstrates knowledge, understanding, and practical experience where applicable of public worship/spiritual practice such as jummah prayer, Eid, janazah, vigil, etc., with little aid is sufficient.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the strategies to identify and cultivate resources specific to supporting public worship/spiritual practice. Example of cultivating or developing a resource that supports public worship/spiritual practice indicates strong interpersonal skills and resourcefulness.<br><br>Provides at least one distinct example with a discussion regarding the development, coordination, and facilitation of public worship/spiritual practice. Examples demonstrate the ability to understand and accommodate a range of Muslim practices. Examples demonstrate an understanding of the applicant's limitations of expertise and makes referrals as appropriate. | Demonstrates knowledge, understanding, and practical experience where applicable of public worship/spiritual practice such as jummah prayer, Eid, janazah, vigil, etc., without aid.<br><br>Demonstrates knowledge and awareness of the strategies to identify and cultivate resources specific to supporting public worship/spiritual practice. At least one example of cultivating or developing a resource that supports public worship/spiritual practice.<br><br>Provides at least two distinct examples with a discussion regarding the development, coordination, and facilitation of public worship/spiritual practice. Examples demonstrate the ability to understand and accommodate a range of Muslim practices. Example demonstrates an understanding of the applicant's limitations of expertise and makes referrals as appropriate. |

| Professional Theory and Practice | Does not demonstrate competency<br>1 | Needs clarification<br>2 | Competent with areas of improvement<br>3 | Demonstrates competency<br>4 | Exceeds competency<br>5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Establishing and Maintaining Professional and Interdisciplinary Relationships Inside and Outside of Institutions in Which They Function** | Demonstrates no ability to articulate their personal boundaries or potential blind spots.<br><br>No examples provided illustrate the applicant's experience in professional and interdisciplinary relationships inside and outside the institutions in which they function. | Demonstrates an understanding of their professional role, personal and professional boundaries, and potential blind spots in developing professional and interdisciplinary relationships is limited with low self-awareness.<br><br>Examples with a discussion regarding experiences in establishing and maintaining professional and interdisciplinary relationships. Discussion on strengths, challenges, and lessons learned for chaplaincy practice is surface level with little commentary on lessons learned for chaplaincy practice.<br><br>Discussion raises concerns regarding experience and ability to address conflict and maximize outcomes. | Demonstrates a sense of understanding of their personal boundaries and potential blind spots in developing professional and interdisciplinary relationships. Discussion is only surface level.<br><br>Provides an example with a discussion regarding effective and ineffective experiences in establishing and maintaining professional or interdisciplinary relationships. One area may have stronger experience and background. | Demonstrates a clear understanding of their professional role boundaries, and potential blind spots in developing professional and interdisciplinary relationships.<br><br>Provides at least one example with a discussion regarding experiences in establishing and maintaining professional and interdisciplinary relationships with a discussion on strengths, challenges, and lessons learned for chaplaincy practice.<br><br>The discussion illustrates experience and ability to address conflict and maximize outcomes. | Demonstrates a clear understanding of their professional role, personal and professional boundaries, and potential blind spots in developing professional and interdisciplinary relationships.<br><br>Provides at least two examples with a discussion regarding experiences in establishing and maintaining professional and interdisciplinary relationships with discussion on strengths, challenges, and lessons learned for chaplaincy practice.<br><br>The discussion illustrates experience and ability to address conflict and maximize outcomes. |
| **Articulating an Understanding of Institutional Culture and Systems Especially When it Comes to Ethical Decision-making** | Does not demonstrate the ability to provide an understanding of the predominant and various sub-cultures of the institution.<br><br>Does not demonstrate knowledge regarding the various systems impacted by the institutional culture(s) and how that may impact their ethical decision-making ability.<br><br>Does not demonstrate the ability to provide a specific example of how the knowledge or lack thereof regarding institutional culture impacts their ethical decision-making. | Demonstrates their understanding of the predominant culture of the institution. Knowledge of any sub-cultures within the institution is limited.<br><br>The discussion articulates the various systems impacted by the institutional culture(s) and how that may impact their ethical decision-making ability.<br><br>Provides one example with a discussion regarding ethical decision-making. Describes the situation and how the applicant's knowledge of institutional culture and systems impacted their decision-making. | Demonstrates their understanding of the predominant culture of the institution. Knowledge of any sub-cultures within the institution is adequate, but there are some gaps.<br><br>The discussion articulates the various systems impacted by the institutional culture(s) and how that may impact their ethical decision-making ability. Discussion is adequate, with a majority of surface-level knowledge being articulated.<br><br>Provides one example with a discussion regarding ethical decision-making. Describes the situation and how the applicant's knowledge of institutional culture and systems impacted their decision-making. | Demonstrates an understanding of the predominant and various sub-cultures of the institution and the people it serves is sufficient and well-rounded.<br><br>Discussion articulates the various systems; how that may impact their ethical decision-making ability is sufficient. Discussion may have some minor gaps but demonstrates awareness and nuance.<br><br>Provides at least one example with a discussion regarding ethical decision-making. Describes the situation, how the applicant's knowledge or lack thereof, institutional culture and systems impacted their decision-making, and any internal friction regarding institutional and faith value systems. | Demonstrates a clear understanding of the predominant and various sub-cultures of the institution and the people it serves.<br><br>The discussion articulates the various systems (and institutional policies) impacted by the institutional culture(s) and how that may impact their ethical decision-making ability.<br><br>Provides at least two examples with a discussion regarding ethical decision-making. Describes the situations, how the applicant's knowledge or lack thereof, institutional culture and systems impacted their decision-making, and any internal friction regarding institutional and faith value systems. |

| **Professional Theory and Practice** (Continued) | **Does not demonstrate competency 1** | **Needs clarification 2** | **Competent with areas of improvement 3** | **Demonstrates competency 4** | **Exceeds competency 5** |
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| **Demonstrating an Ability to Effectively Document Interactions Within the Institutions Where They Work** | Does not demonstrate the ability to comply with institutional policies and document using various formats and means of interactions within their institution.<br><br>No systems created or improved by the applicant or inability to show impact.<br><br>Examples of their ability to document interactions effectively is vague or not provided. | Limited number and range of examples provided that demonstrate the ability to comply with institutional policies and document using various formats and means of interactions within their institution.<br><br>Discussion includes any documents or documentation systems created or improved by the applicant and the impact of effective documentation for the institution and the end user. Demonstrates ability to discern critical elements to document in various situations is not discussed.<br><br>Provides at least two examples of their ability to document interactions effectively. | Examples that demonstrate the ability to comply with institutional policies and document using various formats and means of interactions within their institution are adequate with some limitations to formats and means of interaction.<br><br>Discussion includes any documents or documentation systems created or improved by the applicant and the impact of effective documentation for the institution and the end user. Discussion of impact to end user may not be fully known or understood. Demonstrates the ability to discern critical elements to document in various situations is adequate with some gaps.<br><br>Examples of their ability to document interactions effectively is adequate. | The array of examples demonstrates the ability to comply with institutional policies and document using various formats and means of interaction within their institution is sufficient.<br><br>Discussion includes any documents or documentation systems created or improved by the applicant and the impact of effective documentation for the institution and the end user. This may be limited in experience particularly regarding systems-improvement but shows overall competency. Demonstrates ability to discern critical elements to document in various situations is sufficient.<br><br>Provides at least one example of their ability to document interactions effectively. | Provides an array of examples that demonstrate the ability to comply with institutional policies and document using various formats and means of interactions within their institution.<br><br>Discussion includes any documents or documentation systems created or improved by the applicant and the impact of effective documentation for the institution and the end user. Demonstrates ability to discern critical elements to document in various situations.<br><br>Provides at least two examples of their ability to document interactions effectively. |

| Glossary of Terms | | |
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| 1 | **Adequate** | Response meets the minimum requirement, but just barely. |
| 2 | **Competent** | Response indicative of having the necessary ability, knowledge, or skill. |
| 3 | **Cultural humility** | Cultural humility is active engagement in an ongoing process of self-reflection, in which individuals seek to:<br>Examine their personal history/background and social position related to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, profession, education, assumptions, values, beliefs, biases, and culture, and how these factors impact interpersonal interactions. (CDC) |
| 4 | **Discrimination** | Discrimination refers to the differential treatment of the members of different ethnic, religious, national, or other groups. Discrimination is usually the behavioral manifestation of prejudice and therefore involves negative, hostile, and injurious treatment of members of rejected groups. (APA definition) |
| 5 | **Equality** | Equality is achieved when each person or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. (CDC) |
| 6 | **Equity** | Equity is achieved when it is recognized that each person or group of people has different circumstances, and resources are allocated accordingly to reach an equal outcome. |
| 7 | **Knowledge of Islamic rituals and ability to perform and lead the rituals, and or advise/facilitate accordingly as required per chaplaincy area** | **Corrections:** End of life issues including salatul janazah. Communal observances including salatul jumu'ah, daily congregational salah, saum. Holiday observances including Eid salah. Study circles including halaqa, taleem, tarbiyyah, tilawa. Advising administration/staff from the Islamic perspective.<br><br>**Military:** Communal observances including salatul jumu'ah, daily congregational salah, saum. Holiday observances including Eid salah. Study circles including halaqa, taleem, tarbiyyah, tilawa. Advising administration/staff from the Islamic perspective.<br>Life cycle events:<br>• End of life issues including salatul janazah, washing and shrouding of the deceased<br>• Birth rituals including aqeeqah<br>• Nikkah<br><br>**Healthcare:** Communal observances including salatul jumu'ah, daily congregational salah. Comforting patients through tilawa. Life cycle events including end of life issues, salatul janazah, birth rituals. Advising patients and interdisciplinary team/staff from the Islamic perspective. |
| 8 | **Limited** | Response is insufficient or not enough to meet the stated criteria |
| 9 | **Prejudice** | Prejudice refers to irrational or unjustifiable negative emotions or evaluations toward persons from other social groups, and it is a primary determinant of discriminatory behavior (Friske, Gilbert, & Gardner, 2010) |
| 10 | **Racism** | Racism is a form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others. Racism generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of the group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases it leads to violence. (APA definition) |
| 11 | **Sufficient** | Response meets criteria and information is as much as is needed to determine competency. |

***Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice***
**Call for Papers, 2026–2027**

# *The Umma That Leads*

The *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* is a double-blind, peer-reviewed, online academic and interdisciplinary journal published by Indiana University and sponsored by The Islamic Seminary of America Inc. The *Journal* invites submissions which combine intellectual rigor with community engagement, offering a platform for scholars, researchers, and thinkers to share their latest findings and insights. It aims to foster dialogue between academics, activists, and community leaders on Islam—both as a faith and as a lived practice in America. To this end, successful submissions will demonstrate theoretical and methodological sophistication, engagement with existing scholarship, and accessibility to non-specialist readers.

> *We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you.*[1]

This Qurʾānic verse, along with the famous declaration of the Prophet ﷺ that, "Every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock,"[2] highlight that to be a believer is to be a leader—regardless of the political or social role one holds. Leadership, in this sense, becomes an essential part of being a Muslim, and consequently, to practice Islam, is to lead and be a trustee on earth.[3] This challenges and shifts the conventional understandings of leadership, often defined by power and authority, to a more value-centered paradigm grounded in the Qurʾānic values of truth, accountability, service, and ethical responsibility.

On this basis, the seventh volume of the *Journal* seeks to explore the theme of an ***umma that leads***—individually and collectively. It invites critical reflection on what it means to be a leader, the diverse forms and manifestations of leadership beyond conventional notions of power, and the implications of what it means for every single Muslim to be a leader.

[1] Qurʾān 2:143.
[2] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* no. 7138; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1829.
[3] Qurʾān 2:30.

Papers may address, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Qurʾānic and Prophetic Paradigms**: Leadership as *amāna* and *khilāfa*; prophetic models of leadership in politics, family, community, and society; lessons from the Qurʾān (e.g., *Sūrat al-Kahf*) and the Sunna.
- **Beyond Authority**: Reframing leadership as responsibility rather than privilege and authority; value-centered versus personality/authority-centered models of leadership.
- **Historical and Intellectual Perspectives**: The thoughts of classical, medieval, and modern Muslim scholars on leadership, its various domains, and manifestations (e.g., Ibn Khaldūn, al-Māwardī, al-Ghazālī); the role of *waqf*, institutions, and community-led initiatives; comparative and critical reflections on different structural institutions and identity formations (e.g., *umma* vs. *dawla* vs. *sultanate*).
- **Leadership in Practice**: Institutional models in mosques and Islamic centers; case studies of leadership initiatives rooted in the Qurʾān and Sunna; strengths and challenges in leadership development and mentorship.
- **Ethics and Challenges of Leadership**: Spiritual abuse and misuse of authority; ethics of disagreement and *adab al-ikhtilāf*; guidelines for activism and civic engagement; leadership during times of crisis and oppression.
- **Leadership and Inclusion**: Women in leadership; converts and new Muslims; marginalized voices and communities within the *umma*; reflections on leadership journeys from community leaders and activists.
- **Philosophical and Contemporary Reflections**: The theological and philosophical foundations of leadership; Muslim communities navigating leadership in the modern nation-state; challenges of authority, politics, and civic responsibility in contemporary contexts.

This issue may include any of the following types of academic articles, along with shorter reflection pieces, abstracts or research briefings, book reviews, and conference reports related to the current theme:

- **Original Research Findings**: Empirical research on leadership, authority, and community & individual responsibility in Muslim contexts, with reflections on implications for the American Muslim community.
- **Theoretical Articles**: Analytical work on Qurʾān, Sunna, and Islamic traditions, engaging theological, philosophical, or ethical dimensions of leadership.
- **Historical Studies**: Examinations of past institutions, movements, and scholars that shaped Islamic and Muslim understandings of leadership and responsibility.

- **American Islamic Praxis Articles**: Studies of contemporary practices, institutions, and leadership models in Muslim communities in America.
- **Case Studies, Qualitative Interviews, and Oral Histories**: Explorations of individual leaders, imams, scholars, activists, or institutions, and how they embody or struggle with leadership responsibilities.

## Guidelines for Authors

### *Types of Submissions*

The *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* invites:

- **Academic articles** related to the current theme: 6,000–10,000 words.
- **Shorter reflection pieces** by researchers, activists, imams, and chaplains: 2,000–4,000 words.
- **Reviews of books** relevant to the current theme: 2,000–3,000 words.
- **Abstracts of dissertations and theses** which connect to the theme of the current volume: 300–500 words.
- **Research briefings** which highlight the current theme: 700–2,000 words.
- **Short reports on conferences, workshops, and intensives** related to the American Muslim community, especially in relation to the current theme: 1,000–2,000 words.

Please note that the above word counts serve as a guide. Submissions which do not adhere strictly to these word counts will still be considered.

### *Assembly of the Manuscript*

Manuscripts should be submitted in Microsoft Word format. All submissions must conform to the *Journal* guidelines: original, unpublished research; in the Chicago (Notes-Bibliography) Style.

The manuscript of an academic article should contain the following parts: a title, an abstract, 3-5 keywords, the text, footnotes, and any tables, figures, and appendices. All submission types (i.e., articles, reflection pieces, book reviews, etc.) should be accompanied by a max. 150-word bio of the author of the submission.

### *Submission of the Manuscript*

Submit a brief note of intent to contribute (and/or a preliminary abstract) noting the type, scope, and focus of your submission by **February 15, 2026**. You will receive a note of acceptance/non-acceptance by **the end of April 2026**.

The completed manuscript will be due by **September 30, 2026**.

The timeline for peer review and publication, after submission of completed manuscripts, is approximately **8 to 10 months**.

All submissions (both those of the initial note of intent as well as the completed manuscript) should be submitted via our **online submission portal**, which can be found at https://bit.ly/jifpsubmissions. Contributors will need to create an account in order to submit via the portal.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact our team via e-mail at journal@islamicseminary.us.